真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝

天地無用！GXP 9

梶島正樹

イラスト 梶島正樹

ファンタジア文庫

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TENCHI MUYO!

Karen was wearing a lightly equipped battle suit. As for Suiren, she was wearing a fully equipped battle suit.

"You... Especially Karen and Suiren! Where do you two think you're going? A battlefield?"
"...Now then, you be given a lecture on how to act on Earth."
Kiriko stood in front of the monitor as an instructor. Veins were popping out near her temples, but she made the declaration while trying to hide the anger in her voice.

"Just how far can we go?"
Kiriko felt unspeakable distress at those words and face.
"...Don't leave me."
Her voice sounded childlike, as if fading away.

True Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Gaiden

Tenchi Muyo! GXP9

Masaki Kajishima

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Chapter One: An Incident

Bad luck often follows good fortune, that was just an everyday reality for Seina. Just an hour after he thought he'd finally get to go home for a well-deserved vacation, a distress signal was picked up and relayed through headquarters since his ship happened to be free and relatively close to the scene. So, Gyokuren and the others, who had been excited to see Seina's parents, had their vacation postponed. And the fact that they ended up witnessing something they never wanted to see at the rescue site was all due to Seina's bad luck.

"Jump-out complete! Twenty-five seconds until we're clear of space-time vibrations!"

The space-time vibrations generated during a high-level hyperspace jump out rendered sensors inoperable for several tens of seconds. Imperial Ships used this to block enemy ships from jumping, but they only did so by intentionally increasing their energy mass during the jump-out; they didn't do this during a normal jump. However, the real problem with high-level hyperspace jumps wasn't the sensors, it was the jump itself. The issue was that Kamidake, no, the very existence of a ship capable of performing a high-level hyperspace jump with current technology, could not be revealed.

While Imperial Ships and Ryo-Ohki could conceal themselves indefinitely when using high-level hyperspace jumps, Kamidake, which operated under the GP and had a strict schedule, could not do so. For routine decoy missions, using a standard jump would suffice, but for rescue missions like this one, it became a problem. This was especially true when time was critical to the survivors' lives, and even more so when Seina was the one making that decision.

Kiriko and the others could accept that compromise, but Seina couldn't. However, none of them could disregard Seina's feelings. As a result, they decided to put aside any concerns about the future and performed a high-level hyperspace jump.

"Situation stabilized! Confirming target ship, ten enemy small craft, and their carrier."

"That's the power of high-level hyperspace navigation. We wouldn't have made it in time under normal circumstances."

"Can we stop the enemy carrier?"

"Of course!"

Amane shouted back at Seina's question, brimming with excitement. For the current Kamidake, it was a piece of cake.

"Wait! High-energy reaction!"

The moment Kiriko announced that, the enemy was engulfed in a blinding white light.

"They self-destructed!? Damn it, they've destroyed the evidence!"

“Precision scan complete. Fifteen escape pods confirmed.”

“So the enemy unit was engaged in mopping up operations. Any survivors?”

“There are nine capsules showing operational activity, but only one has a life signal.”

“What do you mean?”

The answer was obvious, but Amane asked anyway. It was to give Seina a sense of emotional stability. Mechanical tasks could seem dehumanizing, making Seina, who wasn’t used to this kind of situation, feel uneasy and alienated. It was the same way Fuku felt when built the subsystem.

“For now, let's just focus on retrieving it as quickly as possible.” Kiriko said as she looked at Seina.

Seina immediately gave a small nod.

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When a ship has been attacked by pirates and the interior has been ransacked, the on-site investigation was conducted using specialized probes and nano machines. This was a measure designed to maintain the ship’s internal condition while allowing for a swift search of the interior. After all, having human-sized personnel enter the interior meant opening gaps large enough to cause air leaks and trigger unforeseen incidents. And there was another reason: to shield underage crew members, specifically those on Kamidake, from the sight of the gruesome scene.

So Kiriko and the others took control of the probes themselves and, just to be safe, made sure not to let Fuku see them either.

“How does it look inside the ship?”

Seeing Seina’s worried expression, Kiriko hesitated slightly before replying, “There were no survivors or resuscitable individuals on board. We are currently conducting a detailed scan of the interior while recovering the bodies.”

“I see…”

“Myaa?”

Noticing his disappointment, Fuku peered anxiously at Seina’s face. Although Kiriko and the others couldn’t tell how dire the situation at the scene was, Seina’s expression made it clear to him.

“What about the escape capsules?”

Noticing Fuku’s anxiety, Seina asked about the capsule where the survivor had been, trying to distract her. Of course, he wanted to distract himself as well.

“The capsule containing the survivor was recovered a short while ago. Based on the capsule’s data, the survivor’s life support systems were functioning normally, so we put them into sleep mode and are leaving them there until the operation is complete.”

“I see. That’s a relief… So, what about the other capsules?” Seina felt a sense of relief as he stroked Fuku, who was perched on his shoulder.

“Amane, Hakuren, and Karen are currently in the process of retrieving those.”

“I see… I hope there are survivors.” Seina said with a prayer in his heart.

But his wish went unfulfilled, there were no survivors in the other capsules.

In Kamidake’s medical room, the sole survivor, a boy of about five, lay on a bed.

“...He's fine. There are no visible injuries, and I can't find anything wrong with his body.” Kiriko said as she completed scanning the boy’s body.

Seina, who was watching with concern, said, “I see... That's good. But...”

Seina felt relieved, but his expression clouded as he looked at the boy, who remained asleep.

“Hakuren, what’s the situation over there?”

“The recovery of the bodies is complete. We’ve finished sorting them individually and sealing them in capsules.”

“What about identifying the survivors’ families?”

“Based on genetic data, the mother was found in an escape capsule, and the father was found inside the ship. Both bodies are severely damaged, so reconstruction may be necessary… What would you like us to do?”

If a body to be shown to the bereaved family was severely damaged, it was possible to use regenerative cells to restore it to its pre-accident appearance to avoid causing psychological trauma.

“We'll assess the situation and make a decision. Please continue your work.”

“Understood.”

“They must have tried desperately to save him.”

First, the father was shot while trying to get the mother and child to safety; next, the mother placed the child in the escape pod and launched it; and then, just as she managed to squeeze into a pod herself, she collapsed. That was all they could deduce from the condition of the bodies.

“The detailed scan of the scene is complete, so we’ll know the exact sequence of events shortly… but it’s likely just as the captain surmised.”

By collecting data from multiple angles, including residual energy, damage patterns, and the condition of the bodies, it was possible to reconstruct what happened there with a high degree of accuracy. But that wasn’t Seina and the crews’ job.

(Anyway, let’s just be glad that at least one person survived… Hmm?)

Just then, Seina noticed Fuku staring intently at the sleeping boy and Hakuren and the others as they carried out the recovery operation.

“Fuku? …Fuku!” Seina couldn’t help but call out to her as her eyes were surprisingly cold.

“Fumya? Myaa.” As if her personality had suddenly switched, Fuku snapped back to her usual self and wagged her tail happily at Seina.

(……Was it just my imagination?)

Though relieved to see that Fuku had returned to her usual self, his unease didn’t fade. Those cold, calculating eyes were simply too out of character for her.

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“The recovery and sorting of the bodies is complete… I’ve collected as much data as I could, and…” After finishing her checks, Amane stretched her arms wide.

It was a depressing job to begin with so Kiriko didn’t hold that slightly relaxed atmosphere against her.

“We can analyze the data here, but what do you want to do?”

“It’d be wrong to steal their jobs, wouldn’t it? The analysis team lives for this kind of thing.”

“We’ll be re-examining it anyway, so let’s just hand it over as is. I don’t want Kamidake’s abilities to become too widely known.”

“It’s the same with high-level hyperspace navigation. Normally, it takes a fair amount of time to analyze something like that, so doing it in such a short time would definitely raise some eyebrows.”

“You mean… even though we have a usable ability? It was precisely because of that ability that we were able to save that boy…” Seina looked a little dissatisfied with everyone’s opinions.

“It’s an eternal dilemma. Those who possess a Juraian ‘Imperial Ship’ and the Academy’s scientists face the same issue. Even if they know the technology can save the person right in front of them, if it might lead to an even greater disaster, they have to turn a blind eye…”

“A greater disaster?”

“Advanced technology often becomes a source of conflict. And it’s no exaggeration to say that such technology is usually put to military use first. The ‘Imperial Ship’ is no exception; Ryo-Ohki and Kamidake also possess the power to strike fear into people’s hearts.”

“If things go wrong, it could even lead to a galactic war.”

To escape that fear, it was human nature to seek power equal to or greater than it. But if people realized they could not obtain that power, there was a possibility that fear could quickly escalate into war.

“...No way.”

“And when seeking that power, what gets neglected most is personality. It’s embarrassing to admit, but remember when we tried to build a subsystem for Fuku-chan?”

A heart was useless in a weapon. What mattered was whether it could reliably execute orders. It must function without fail the moment the switch was flipped.

“……”

“Of course, if possible, we’d use dummies or tamper with records. With something like an Imperial Ship, once you strip away the outer hull and leave just the unit, it’s easy to disguise, and above all, a state-sponsored cover-up is possible. But you understand that in our case, it’s quite difficult, don’t you?”

“……Yes.”

“Fortunately, since we’re currently operating directly under Airi-sama, falsification is easy. But once we’re officially deployed and operating as part of a fleet rather than independently, our schedule will be publicly managed, making concealment virtually impossible.”

“I see. I understand.”

There were some unresolved feelings, but considering the involvement of Fuku, Royal Trees, the people who supported Seina at the Academy, and the people of Jurai, he couldn’t act rashly. Some might say that it was the privilege of youth to cherish one's own feelings and charge ahead. But the responsibility that young people bore when they failed was ultimately light. No adult would entrust truly important decisions to a young man.

However, and this was the crux of it. Precisely because of this, Seina, who possessed a uniquely biased probability, could not afford to make a mistake. For Seina's probability bias was a power of such violent purity that it was a calamity capable of spiraling out of control at the slightest provocation. Moreover, he possessed the power of Kamidake, which rivaled that of an Imperial Ship. All Seina could do, just as those who possessed Imperial Ships must, was to live with that dilemma.

"Do you know the identity of the surviving boy?"

"He was registered in the Central Gene Bank. It's unclear how he ended up on the ship that was attacked, though."

The boy's data appeared on the screen, along with photos of his parents.

"Oh, so these are his parents. No other relatives, huh?"

"It's a blessing that at least this child survived. We have no choice but to look at it that way."

"Anyway, he's the only witness, so we'll just have to hand him over to the investigators along with the documents."

There was nothing more Seina and the others could do for this child.

"Captain, the boy has regained consciousness."

Upon hearing Ryoko's report, Seina and the others rushed to the transfer gate to the medical area.

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At the exact moment Seina and the crew focused their attention on the boy, something strange happened in the area where the bodies were being kept.

Screeeeeeee! A blade burst out from inside the capsule, slicing through the armor along with the alarm. Then, a corpse with arms that had turned into blades emerged from within.

That corpse first unlocked the other capsules, freeing its comrades one after another. The initial alarm lasted only a moment, and since the alarm priority for the capsules themselves was low, and because they were preoccupied with the boy, Seina and the others didn't notice it.

Chapter Two: A Detour

“I see. Well done!”

At his second-in-command’s report, Tarrant jumped to his feet, almost leaping out of his chair. His face was lit up with a beaming smile his subordinates had never seen before.

“We’re scheduled to arrive at the rendezvous point in thirty minutes.”

“Good! I’m heading to the bridge.” Tarrant rushed off, almost pushing his executive officer and subordinates aside.

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Thirty minutes later, the Daidoros jumped out at the rendezvous point, opened its massive, mouth-like hatch, and swallowed the Kamidake whole.

Tarrant and the rest of the Daidoros crew showed little interest in the Kamidake’s peculiar hull, which would normally have piqued their curiosity. Instead, their attention was focused on the women who had been restrained on the Kamidake and brought aboard.

The sound of someone swallowing hard could be heard. Tarrant’s men, who usually looked down with contempt upon the prey brought to the Daidoros, now gazed at Amane and the others with an expression bordering on worship, utterly transfixed by their overwhelming beauty.

Without exception, anyone brought onboard Daidoros became a plaything for Tarrant and his men. They were raped and tortured, and in the end, reduced to mere pieces of meat. However, Tarrant was the only one who was truly mad; in reality, the others merely appeared mad due to drugs. This was because those who shared Tarrant’s madness often made the mistake of encroaching on his share, incurring his displeasure and resulting in their destruction. Ultimately, Tarrant alone was the protagonist of this game, while the others served only to liven it up.

However, this time, Tarrant’s interest lay solely in Seina and Kiriko; he showed no interest in the other six women, not even Amane or Gyokuren, who possessed rare beauty. In other words, while his subordinates could not lay a hand on Kiriko or Seina, they were free to do as they pleased with the rest. Even the subordinates, who could usually only watch from the sidelines, had a high chance of being able to join the party.

Even the executives who had long put up with Tarrant’s madness considered Amane and the others to be women who were ‘far too precious’ to be treated as disposable. In fact, the executives had already made a secret agreement among themselves to sneak past Tarrant’s watchful eye and escort Amane and the others off of Daidoros. All that remained was to pray that Tarrant wouldn’t change his mind. However, it seemed the executives’ concerns were unfounded.

“Finally, we meet.” Tarrant, who had made his way from the bridge to the forward large armored dock, didn’t even glance at Amane and the others; instead, he stared intently at

Kiriko and Seina with flushed cheeks.

“Tarrant-sama, we’re all clear.”

At those words, Tarrant finally approached Kiriko and ran his hand sensually over her cheek.

“...At last, I’ve made you mine... Heh heh heh.”

Tarrant seemed to find comfort in the intimidation radiating from Kiriko, who was glaring at him with the same murderous expression she’d worn back then. It was almost like sexual pleasure.

“Hmph!”

He hastily looked away. The main course was still a long way off; they were still at the appetizer stage. Next, Tarrant's eyes turned to Seina. Seina's frightened expression was also a treat for Tarrant.

“Do you remember this?” Tarrant smoothly drew that knife and flashed it right before Seina’s eyes.

Then, rolling up his sleeve, he flaunted the wound Seina had inflicted, one he’d deliberately left untouched.

“I left it there so I wouldn’t forget my revenge against you… Yamada Seina.”

“……”

Seina’s throat made a gulping sound as he realized the fate that awaited him. To Tarrant, it gave him a sense of pleasure akin to savoring the finest hors d’oeuvre. But for Tarrant, who had endured endless humiliation up to this point, it only fueled his hunger further. The hand holding the knife began to tremble slightly.

“Guh!”

Tarrant pressed his other hand down on the trembling one. If he gave in to that passion now and devoured everything, Seina would be reduced to a pile of flesh in the blink of an eye.

“Tarrant-sama, your usual room is ready.” His aide said, having sensed his state.

For the aide, diverting Tarrant’s wrath toward himself was a life-or-death gamble, but if Tarrant had given in to his rage and left Seina in a state beyond recovery, there was a chance he would take all the other women just to vent his frustration.

(You’ve got to be kidding me, a woman of such exquisite quality!)

To him, she was worth every bit of it. Fortunately, his gamble paid off, and Tarrant regained his composure.

“Hmph! All right… First, let me repay my debt. We’ll have our fun slowly afterward… got it!”

Tarrant swung his knife and thrust it forcefully into Seina's arm, aiming for the exact spot where he'd been stabbed. And at that very moment.

BOOM!!!

The area was engulfed in a blinding flash, and the next moment, a deafening explosion and shockwave struck Tarrant and his crew.

"W-what the—!?" The officers on the bridge shouted in confusion.

"Enemy ship activated! High-energy reaction!!" The operator's shout and Kamidake's firing were simultaneous.

Daidoros burst from the inside, as if it were a watermelon rigged with explosives. Daidoros and Tarrant, feared not only by the GP but also by his fellow pirates, found that even his vaunted heavy-duty, energy-resistant heavy armor was as thin as paper in the face of Kamidake. With a further follow-up attack, Daidoros was blown to smithereens in an instant, returning to the dust of space.

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"Daidoros, explosion confirmed… completely destroyed."

On Kamidake's bridge, Seina and the others, who were supposed to be captive, stared at Daidoros as it disintegrated.

"Roger."

"Captain, is something wrong?" Kiriko asked, noticing the slightly bewildered look on Seina's face, though she already suspected the reason.

"...I wonder if it was really okay to do something like that out of nowhere...Of course I know it was Tarrant, but..."

"It's karma, he brought it upon himself. Besides, there's a standing order to sink Daidoros immediately upon discovery." Amane replied cheerfully, without a care in the world.

"There's a similar order to shoot Tarrant on sight… though that one comes from the military. And as you saw, the moment he harmed a completely defenseless prisoner…"

"That's not what I meant. I was wondering if there were any other people captured…"

"No living human other than the crew is ever allowed on board the Daidoros. That's common knowledge among us." Elma wore a smile tinged with displeasure.

"What about all the information Tarrant has?"

"That's why the order is to sink it immediately." Kiriko muttered to herself.

It was an order to destroy evidence issued by those connected to Tarrant to protect their

own positions.

“With Kamidake, we could capture Daidoros or arrest Tarrant, but conversely, wouldn’t we need proper preparations to go easy on him? I've learned that these Animeroids as a backup are actually surprisingly useful, though...”

“Animeroids… pseudo-bodies that operate using force fields and personal data. We still lack the data to use them effectively in combat, and we haven’t studied them enough to deploy them in actual battle just yet. This time, they were merely decoys meant to lead us to Tarrant’s location.”

“Yes, that's right. Fuku's functions only just became fully operational, and she still doesn't know much about it... I got a little flustered. I'm sorry.” Seina bowed his head to Kiriko and the others.

“I-it’s fine! …It’s our own lack of preparation. If we’d had a plan in place beforehand, it might have been different, but since it was such a sudden turn of events…” Kiriko said and looked over at Fuku.

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“W-what... Where are we? Huh?”

Seina and the others, who had rushed to the teleportation gate upon learning that the boy had regained consciousness, were bewildered to find themselves teleported back to the bridge.

“W-what? The captain and the others are here??”

It wasn’t Seina and the others who had been transported to the bridge, but Hakuren and everyone else who had been working elsewhere.

“A teleportation glitch!?”

“No way! Kamidake’s systems should be fully operational by now…”

Everyone turned to look at Seina at once.

“Is this my... fault again?” Seina said sheepishly

But just as he said that, “Myaa!” Fuku meowed loudly from the center of the bridge, and several monitors came to life.

“Is that… us!?”

The monitors displayed Seina and the girls working at the location they were supposed to be heading to.

“Simulated Animeroids! Why were they activated?”

“Myaa!”

“Could it be Fuku-chan!?”

With everyone’s eyes on her, Fuku wagged her tail with an air of detachment. What happened next was an attack by the boy and the moving corpses, and the fake Seina and the others were captured despite their futile resistance. Kamidake, controlled via the pseudo-bridge, headed toward Daidoros.

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“Thanks to Fuku-chan.” Kiriko stepped forward and stroked Fuku’s head.

“Myan!”

“You’re amazing, Fuku.”

“Myaa~~n” With everyone petting her head, Fuku was in seventh heaven.

There wasn’t a trace of the loneliness she’d felt when Kiriko and the others were trying to build the subsystem.

“Still, to be able to create a force field of that magnitude remotely… This really is a ship worthy of Washu-sama. If we study how to use it a little more, its range of applications will expand exponentially.”

“But that’s only possible with a highly advanced personal system, you know.”

“I never would’ve thought that Airi-sama’s perverted personal data, which was planted in NB back then, would actually come in handy. Hahahaha.”

“It’s a bit bittersweet to be saved by a philosopher’s hobby, isn’t it?”

Everyone nodded at Hakuren’s words. Kiriko, in particular, shuddered as if it were happening to her, recalling the moment Tarrant had touched the force field.

“Still, the enemy’s bioroids really took us by surprise. Their biological and kinetic signals were so faint that even GP-class scout ship sensors had a hard time detecting them. Let alone detecting them with a standard warship…”

“There was a rumor that Tarrant had preserved the technology development division that the Shank Guild owned during its heyday… It might actually be true.”

“We have a captured sample of the enemy’s bioroids, so let’s leave that to Airi-sama.”

“But how was Fuku able to anticipate the enemy’s movements? She’s only just been born and has no experience… And besides!”

Seina couldn’t stop thinking about the look on Fuku’s face back then. Those cold, calculating eyes—so different from Kiriko’s, Seto’s, or Airi’s… and yet, they seemed somehow familiar.

“Since Kamidake has all of the GP’s crime data, maybe she deduced it from that…”

“Well, it is a ship built by that legendary Philosopher. It wouldn’t be surprising if it had an advanced crime prediction program.”

“Really… we can’t even begin to imagine how much power a fully activated Kamidake will possess. For now, let’s not overthink it and just accept this as it is. Once we get to Earth, we’ll meet Washu-sama, so I think we can discuss it with her then.”

Though she sensed Seina’s anxiety, Kiriko smiled gently.

“I suppose so.”

Watching Fuku playfully nuzzling him as usual, Seina pushed his anxiety deep into his heart.

“Well then, let’s wrap up the loose ends and take a break.”

It had been a bit of an unpleasant detour, but their original goal was to return to Earth. The best thing to do was to quickly replace those unpleasant memories with happy anticipation.

About an hour later, Airi received a detailed report from Kiriko. She skimmed through the main points and nodded.

“OK. I’ll handle the timeline in the report here. Since Washu-sama is in charge of examining the sample, you should head straight to Earth.”

“Understood.”

“Good work. Have a nice vacation… Kiriko-chan. Do your best.”

“Airi-sa—”

Airi flashed a meaningful wink and quickly cut the communication before she could be scolded.

“It seems Tarrant really is hiding the Shank Guild’s legacy after all.” Mikami, who had been watching Airi and the others’ exchange with a wry smile, said the moment Airi cut the connection.

The Shank Guild was a pirate guild that in the past, rivaled the current Da Ruma Guild in scale. Before it was defeated in the war against Jurai and disbanded, it was said to have possessed a large-scale research organization similar to the Jurai Imperial Academy. However, when the guild was disbanded, not even a trace of it was found...

“The organization that developed Daidoros and sank a third-generation ship, huh… I doubt they can operate on the same scale as before, but if they’ve narrowed down their research focus, it’s not impossible.”

“If that’s the case, they’re quite a troublesome opponent. I’m having someone check the chain of command that designated Kamidake for this mission. Since we used a high-level hyperspace jump, the timeline has been significantly accelerated, so we might be able to catch them off guard.”

“We might be able to catch them by the tail of their cover-up. Still, Seina-kun is a genius at setting decoys. Or is it more like a natural disaster for him?”

“If Tarrant’s death can be confirmed, this might be resolved sooner, but...”

“If Kamidake has any observational data, Washu-sama will be able to unravel the mystery of Daidoros. Besides, either way, we've already laid the bait that they're sure to take.”

“Rather than a genius at baiting, he’s a genius at crafting the bait itself.”

That was a slight dig at Airi. But for Airi, a dig like that was nothing. Like water off a duck’s back.

“I’m used to being disliked.” Airi brushed off Mikami’s dig with ease.

News of the strange occurrences on Daidoros had reached the Da Ruma Guild’s headquarters, the planetary fortress known as The Big Da Ruma.

The planetary fortress, The Big Da Ruma, was constantly on the move and never stayed in one place. Inside, protected by its outer armor, was a small natural planet. Da Ruma’s palace was located on this planet, which was about the same size as Earth’s moon.

Da Ruma, the Guild Leader, rarely showed his face even before the senior executives. Only a select few aides, the Deputy Leader, and the two concubines at his side knew what he really looked like. Even here, Da Ruma’s figure was hidden in the deep darkness; not even his silhouette could be made out, let alone his features.

“...I see. So Daidoros has fallen. No matter how cunning he may have been, he was, after all, just a mad young upstart. He let his own greed control him and brought about his own destruction.”

Contrary to those words, a hint of pity could be detected in Da Ruma’s tone.

“His organization seems to be keeping it a closely guarded secret… but when you treat your subordinates with such contempt, there’s no way you can keep anything hidden.”

Tarrant’s subordinates were constantly being replaced due to purges, making it difficult to block spies. Though it was doubtful that Tarrant had ever intended to eliminate spies entirely, the spies sent by the Guild had their somatic cells converted into various sensors. Those sensors detected the spies’ disappearance. In other words, they detected Daidoros’s explosion.

“That said, Tarrant’s death hasn’t been confirmed yet.”

“Huh, he’s quite tenacious. Well, Daidoros is one of the Shank Guild’s legacies. That’s certainly a possibility.”

“...It’s a nuisance.”

“It is troublesome, but since Tarrant, the heir, regards it as nothing more than a toy, he cannot be considered a threat, nor can we expect much from him. As for that boy, we may need to give him some thought as well.”

“Could it be that you want to hand him over to Yamada Seina?”

“Now that we've dealt with Tarrant, it's time to get serious. In a way, he’s more troublesome than Jurai or the Academy... and above all, I'm curious about that boy's new ship.”

“Are you referring to the rumor that it might be a sister ship to Ryo-Ohki? There is indeed some data that’s a bit concerning.”

“Data that’s concerning?”

“It’s difficult to confirm due to a lack of information, but there are reports of some puzzling aspects in the new ship’s navigation schedule…”

“Is it an Imperial Ship!?”

“The possibility isn’t zero. After all, it’s said to be a sister ship to Ryo-Ohki.”

“I've heard rumors about superior hyperspace navigation capabilities... In any case, we must investigate with all our might. And you should tell Tarrant's collaborators about Daidoros. They still have a reason to exist until Tarrant's death is confirmed. But they must not find out about us. Until we know the whereabouts of Tarrant's legacy, I must be seen as nothing more than an old, arrogant, and powerless figure.”

“Understood. Both the personnel and research data from his organization are essential for the development of the Da Ruma Guild.”

“Even so, it's a matter of probability bias... I never imagined that just one person could have such an impact. In that case, perhaps that fleet is indeed the trump card for resolving this situation.”

“An eye for an eye, I suppose. But it's ironic, isn't it? After all, the idea for that fleet originated with Yamada Seina.”

“What is the progress status?”

“It’s still in the testing phase, but we’re seeing some rather interesting results.”

“...Well, this is more than I expected.” Looking at the data displayed in front of him, Da Ruma grinned.

“Yes, to be honest, the development team is also surprised by these results. As for our plans moving forward, we intend to form a fleet of ten ships as soon as the final testing phase is complete. If the operational results go well, we plan to begin mass production.”

“If all of my Guild becomes that new fleet, we will have nothing to fear from the GP, let alone Jurai. Hahaha... Ahahahahaha!!”

For Da Ruma, it was the first time he had laughed so heartily since Seina had gone into space.

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“Grrr! That was a close call. If the information had been delayed even a little longer, they would have caught us red-handed.”

The military leaders, who had narrowly escaped disaster thanks to Da Ruma’s leak, were clearly unable to hide their agitation and were taking their frustration out on Nakita.

“I apologize.” Nakita said while staring straight at the generals.

It was a slightly insolent attitude, but he was furious at their careless actions. However, since Nakita was the one actually commanding the field forces, all the generals could do was make sarcastic remarks.

“Hmph! Fine… Still, that Tarrant! He's all talk and no action.”

Sure enough, the general’s criticism shifted toward Tarrant.

“He may be cunning, but at the end of the day, he’s just a hedonistic young upstart.”

“More importantly, the power Yamada Seina used to defeat him seems to be the real deal.”

“At the very least, we can say that his probability is definitely biased.”

Nakita interrupted the general’s flippant remarks.

Nakita was not a blood relative of the Kuramitsu family. He was a self-made military man who had been taken in as a son-in-law from outside the family because of his proven abilities. Though still inexperienced, he had recognized that Seina’s spirit was far from ordinary… no, he even felt threatened by it.

“Given the new-model ship granted to him and the people assisting him, that’s only to be expected.” One of the generals spat out.

Nakita tried to object, but fell silent immediately.

“More importantly, can’t we get detailed data on that new ship? Technically, he belongs to our side!”

“Rumor has it it’s a sister ship to Ryo-Ohki.”

“It’s nothing but a rumor! Hakubi Washu is still missing! …No, how much better it would be if she just stayed missing!” The general cut Nakita off with an exasperated air.

After all, many of the older generation had experienced Ryo-Ohki’s ferocity, either directly or indirectly.

“Before all that, it hasn't been confirmed that Ryo-Ohki is the work of Hakubi Washu.”

“But it's a fact that Ryo-Ohki fought on equal terms with an Imperial Ship. If anyone could build something like that, it would have to be Hakubi Washu or Akara Naja. Or perhaps one of the top Philosophers.”

“Tarrant’s Daidoros is more useful to us than something so uncertain.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ryo-Ohki’s incursion into Jurai is a prime example of why the Imperial Ship is impractical. Its firepower is on a different level, but that’s all it has. It serves as a deterrent, but it’s unsuitable for defense. Even in attack, it lacks diversity.”

War was a matter of numbers. Even if one unit was invincible, if the other nine lost, the battle could not be won. This was especially true in defensive battles.

“Hmm… Now that you mention it, that might explain why Kamidake No. 1 is set to be Jurai’s next flagship.”

“Tarrant's Daidoros is a general-purpose ship designed for mass production. If we can acquire that technology, the military's resurgence will be easy.”

“In that sense, his failure might be a good opportunity to seize his legacy. Nakita! Get us information on Tarrant’s status and whereabouts immediately.”

“Yes sir!” Nakita saluted and quickly left the room.

(Talking about how Tarrant’s death is a good opportunity for the military’s restoration. It’s rather carefree of them to forget that without Tarrant, they can’t do a thing. …Now, I wonder just how much of our movements Aunt Mikami has picked up on from this incident.)

Chapter Three: To Earth

Seina and the girls had gathered in one of the staff briefing rooms inside Kamidake.

“...Now, we will begin the briefing on how to act on Earth.” Standing in front of the monitor as the instructor, Kiriko declared in a voice that suppressed her anger, though the veins in her temples were throbbing.

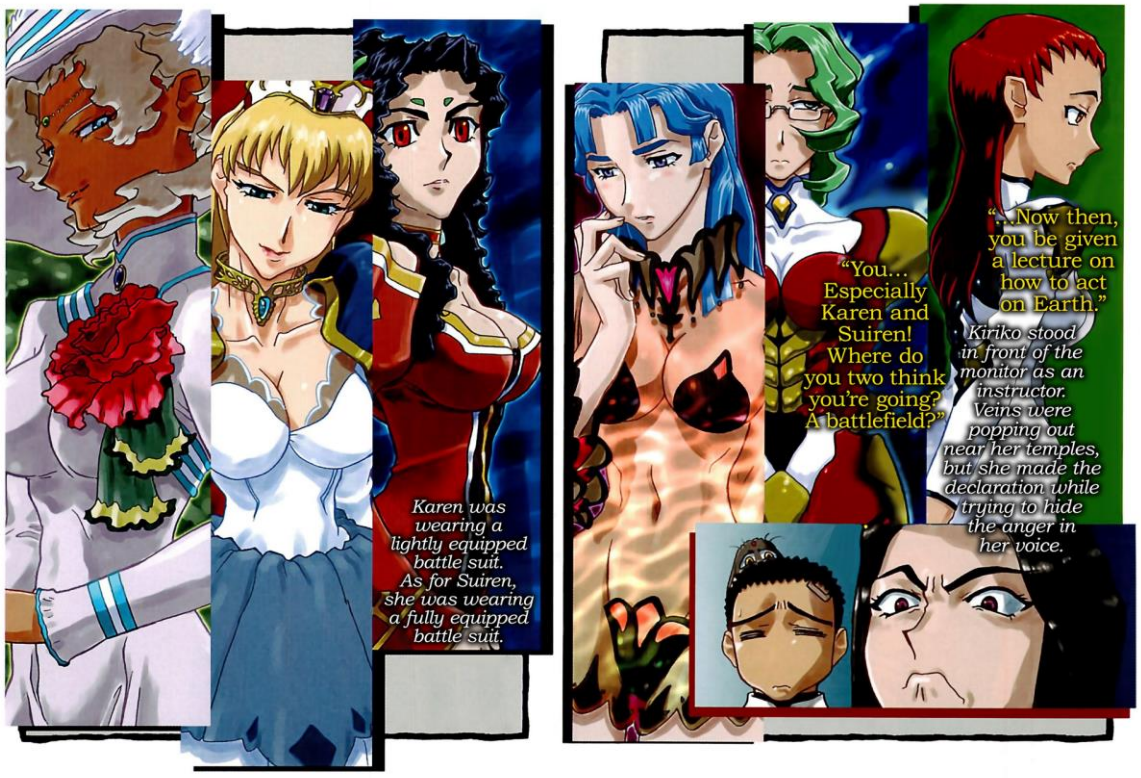
“Myaa…”

Seina, sitting in the assistant instructor’s seat a short distance away from Kiriko, looked at her with a troubled expression, while Fuku, intimidated by Kiriko’s imposing presence, trembled on Seina’s lap.

The reason for this situation lay in the attire of Amane and the others who had gathered.

“You lot… especially Karen and Suiren! Where on earth do you think you’re going? Battle suits?”

Karen was wearing a lightly armored battle suit. As for Suiren, she was wearing a fully equipped, armored battle suit.


Karen was wearing a lightly equipped battle suit. As for Suiren, she was wearing a fully equipped battle suit.
“You… Especially Karen and Suiren! Where do you two think you’re going? A battlefield?”
“...Now then, you be given a lecture on how to act on Earth.”
Kiriko stood in front of the monitor as an instructor. Veins were popping out near her temples, but she made the declaration while trying to hide the anger in her voice.

“...But—” Suiren displayed video footage of the ferocious beasts inhabiting the jungles of Africa, Europe, and South America. “If creatures like these are roaming around, we’ll need to take appropriate precautions…”

Honestly, one could understand where Suiren and Karen were coming from. From a

spacefaring perspective, it was common knowledge that travel time across a planet, even to the opposite side, took only about an hour. By that standard, the regions where those wild beasts dwelt was practically next door.

“I already explained that the Captain and I are from Japan on Earth!! Have you forgotten that Earth is a civilization in its early stages?”

“There aren’t any dangerous animals like that hanging around Seina and Kiriko’s place. If I had to pick one, maybe Mihoshi would be the most dangerous… Ahahahaha~~”

“Amane! You guys have no right to judge others, do you? What on earth are those ridiculous outfits?” Kiriko yelled, slamming her fist down on the monitor.

Amane and Ryoko were dressed as if they were attending a medieval noble’s party or a masquerade ball.

“What do you mean, ridiculous? This is the cutting edge of high society…”

“We’re not going anywhere like that! Amane, you know what kind of place it is, don’t you? Besides, you wouldn't go to a normal family's house dressed like that!”

“As a member of the Kaunaq family, I am meeting Seina’s parents, so I have to make a proper impression.”

“I also have my position as a daughter of the Balta family to consider!” Ryoko, who had returned to human form, also looked at Kiriko with a displeased expression.

“...Listen, you two... Even if I give you the benefit of the doubt, what are you going to do wearing clothes made from materials that clearly don’t exist in an early civilization?!”

“Oh…”

Some parts of their outfits were floating completely in mid-air, while others changed color and constantly shifted shape like ocean waves.

“And then there's Hakuren... I won't ask what you were thinking to get there, but you might get arrested by the police over there dressed like that.”

“???”

Hakuren tilted her head in puzzlement. She was dressed in something that looked almost like a swimsuit or underwear. Basically, she was nearly naked, and on top of that, a sheer, negligee-like screen silk was draped over her, displaying a pattern of faintly glowing, rainbow-colored scales.

“Surprisingly, Gyokuren is the most sensible of the bunch…”

Kiriko stared at Gyokuren with a mixed expression. Her outfit resembled something from the 19th century, the sort worn in New York or Paris, a ‘My Fair Lady’ sort of look. And it suited her incredibly well. It was enough to make one want to clap spontaneously.

“...But wearing that to the captain’s house...” Kiriko sounded a little hesitant, too. Maybe that would be okay after all? She couldn’t make up her mind.

“Is it strange?” Gyokuren glanced at Seina, looking a little embarrassed.

“Ah, no… It suits you very well, but I live in the countryside, so you might stand out a bit.”

“Well, the others are out of the question. In short, everyone is a no-go!”

“Tch... all that preparation for nothing.”

“This briefing was supposed to teach you about Earth in the first place. You guys just jumped the gun, didn’t you? Anyway, just look at the scenery in our town!”

Kiriko projected footage from a small probe. Upon seeing it, Amane and the others all seemed to understand.

“So it’s like casual wear from the suburbs of a planet far from the center… Well, since it doesn’t have that unique vibe like Jurai, our natural-fiber casual clothes should be fine.”

“It’s summer there right now, the high is around thirty-three degrees, give or take two. It’s pretty humid, so it’s quite muggy. You might want to adjust your body clock a bit before we get there.”

“Since I only know Tenchi-kun’s place, I hadn’t really thought about it, but we’re practically the same race, aren’t we?”

“...That's what I said, isn't it? Naturally, since there are no Wau here, Ryoko mustn't transform. Please read your profiles in the materials I've given you carefully and commit each other's details to memory. It’s one of the safest places on Earth, but conspicuous behavior is strictly forbidden. Especially Gyokuren, don’t cause any unnecessary commotion! Of course, since Earthlings haven’t undergone Bio-Enhancement, be careful. Always make sure to go out in groups. I’ll be checking your belongings beforehand!”

While listening to Kiriko’s explanation, Amane and the others were intently studying the materials.

“Well, since you’ll be treated as foreigners, we can get away with it by saying you’re unfamiliar with Japan. Surprisingly, Captain… no, Seina-chan and I are the ones who need to stay on our toes, since this is a place we’re familiar with. Do you remember when I opposed you joining the Academy?”

“Right. I’ll be careful not to end up in the hospital.”

“Well, that wraps up the briefing. Any questions?”

“Sensei, do bananas count as a snack?”

“Alright, alright. I know I’m repeating myself, but don’t forget that you’ll stand out physically in this area.” Kiriko couldn’t help but smile wryly at Amane’s question, then wrapped things

up in a gentle tone.

“Okaaaay♡”

With that, Amane and the others began checking their sewing supplies to prepare for their trip to Earth.

Kamidake was well-equipped with facilities for manufacturing all sorts of items necessary for daily life. This became clear when Fuku and the ship were fully linked, and naturally, among those facilities were sewing and garment-making equipment.

What’s more, it was a remarkable system capable of producing virtually every major natural and synthetic material in the galaxy. But what truly astonished Amane and the others was the fact that they had a stock of pure Juraian silk.

“W-wait… is that real?” Amane muttered with an expression of disbelief as she looked at the towering piles of stock.

“My dad took me to the central distribution market a few times, but I’ve never seen more than about a tenth of this amount! Is it really the real thing?”

“Amane, you know the composition of Pure Juraian Silk is protected by a patent, right?”

“Of course! I know that the raw materials are expensive anyway, so you can't really cut the price by more than about half the regular price!”

In other words, there was little point in taking such risks just to make counterfeit goods.

“They all have stamps on the cases, so they’re genuine. Genuine products from His Majesty the Emperor of Jurai, Funaho-sama, Misaki-sama, and Seto-sama… Genuine products from such distinguished figures. They’re top-grade items even among pure Juraian silk.” Kiriko’s voice trembled.

“I’ve heard that since the imperial family produces these themselves, they have quite a large supply. When we became ladies-in-waiting to Seto-sama, we were given several sets of pure silk formal wear…” Even Hakuren was shocked.

“How generous! That’s Seto-sama for you!” Amane said as she looked at Seina.

Realizing her intention, everyone’s eyes, filled with expectation, tuned on Seina. In other words, they wanted to use it to make clothes.

“I have no use for them it, so please, help yourselves.”

“As expected of the captain, what a generous guy!”

Amane and the others gleefully began discussing how to use the Juraian silk. After all, it was an ultra-luxury item that was extremely hard to come by. Even if they were actually granted permission to use it, they couldn’t decide what to make.

In the end, after discussing it, they decided on two matching formal uniforms for everyone, along with optional items like shirts. They also settled on ten sets of underwear, two sets of casual clothes, and two nightgowns. Incidentally, the total amount used was less than one percent of their inventory.

“You can use more than that.”

“You say that, but… when it actually comes down to it, I’m hesitant.”

Pure Juraian silk was such a high-end material that even Amane felt a bit intimidated by it.

“Besides, with fabric, it’s best to decide after actually trying it out.”

“Anyway, let’s get started on the sewing right away.”

Even though the selection was small, each person got to design their own casual clothes and underwear. Kiriko and the others gleefully began sewing clothes for themselves to wear on Earth, making full use of the enormous amount of clothing data they had on Kamidake.

Two days later, Kamidake arrived on Earth.

Chapter Four: To the Yamada Family

“Coordinates locked. Spatial camouflage active and functioning normally.”

With Hakuren’s report, Kamidake became undetectable to the naked eye and radar. Then, from its satellite orbit, it began a rapid descent toward the pond in front of the Masaki residence.

“There’s no guidance beacon, so be careful.”

“Roger! I’ll hold at 100 meters above ground!”

“Subspace gate key acquired! Key activated. Opening the gate!”

“Subspace gate confirmed open! Descending now.”

Hovering 100 meters above the Masaki family’s pond, Kamidake began its descent once more.

“Ah!”

At that moment, a girl who had just come out of the Masaki house looked up at Kamidake. Normally, of course, Kamidake would be invisible. The only things she could perceive were the ripples spreading from the center of the pond and a slightly stronger breeze, but thanks to her bio-enhanced special vision, she could see the Kamidake clearly.

“Sasami-chan.”

The one waving happily toward Kamidake was Sasami Masaki Jurai, the second princess of the Jurai Masaki family.

“Passing through the sub-space gate, docking at the designated point.”

Having passed through the gate, Kamidake found itself inside a tank filled with a special chemical solution identical to that used in the adjustment tanks on Jurai. Upon docking at the flashing beacon, Kamidake ceased all activity.

“Kamidake stopped. Come on, everyone, hurry! We mustn’t keep Sasami-sama waiting!”

To Kiriko, Sasami was a young lady of the main branch of the family; to Hakuren and the others, she was the granddaughter of their superior and a princess of the imperial family whom they were sworn to serve. Urging Amane and the others on, Kiriko dashed toward the teleportation gate.

“Seina-nii-chaaaaan!” Sasami ran up to Seina as he emerged from the gate.

“Long time no see, Sasami-chan. Have you been well?”

“Yeah! And you too, Seina-nii… Oh!” Sasami looked up at Seina with an adorable smile.

Then, perched on Seina’s shoulder, she spotted Fuku, who was watching her with keen interest.

“Is this Ryo-chan’s little sister!?”

“Her name is Fuku.”

“Hello, Fuku-chan.”

“Mya…aa”

Fuku flinched back for a moment at Sasami’s outstretched hand, but drawn by Sasami’s smiling expression and the faint scent of Ryo-Ohki lingering on her, she leaped into her arms.

“So cute~~! She looks just like Ryo-chan when she was little.”

Sasami hugged Fuku and rubbed her cheek against hers. Fuku seemed happy too, rubbing her head against Sasami.

“Just like Ryo-chan used to be, your ears are still floppy, aren’t they?”

“Myaa!”

Even when Fuku stretched her ears as far as she could, they only rose about a third of the way.

“Hehe. You’ll be able to perk them up fully in a little while.”

"……Sasami-sama." Kiriko, who had been patiently waiting for the right moment to speak, called out to her.

"Ah, welcome back, Kiriko-onee-chan."

Sasami placed Fuku on her head, just as she always did with Ryo-Ohki, and looked over at Kiriko and the others.

"Hello, Amane-onee-chan. Grandmother's ladies-in-waiting are Hakuren-san, Karen-san, Gyokuren-san, and Suiren-san, right? Welcome to Earth. …And then …"

"My name is Ryoko Balta."

"I'm Sasami Masaki Jurai. Could 'Balta' be… that Balta?" Sasami glanced at Kiriko.

"She's Commander Balta's granddaughter."

"Is that so? Thank you for coming."

"I'm the one who should apologize for showing up unannounced." Ryoko was momentarily taken aback by Sasami's polite greeting, delivered in the guise of a young girl.

"Guests are always welcome here. …But sorry, Kiriko. We're harvesting the crops today, so everyone's out in the fields."

"Is that so? I did mention to Washu-sama that we'd be coming here..."

"To Washu-onee-chan? Come to think of it, I haven't seen Washu-onee-chan for about three days."

"Oh, sorry, sorry. …I've been so busy with all the preparations, I completely forgot to tell Tenchi-dono. Hahaha!" Just then, Washu emerged from the teleportation gate, scratching her head.

"Myaa!"

The moment Fuku saw her, she leaped off Sasami's head like a startled rabbit and clung to Washu.

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!"

"Okay, okay. It sounds like you've been through a lot of trouble, but you seem to be doing just fine."

"I… I'm sorry. Because of me, Fuku went through a lot of hardship…"

"Don't worry about it. I don't remember giving birth to a weakling who'd be broken by a little trouble like that. More importantly, this is the first time we've met, right?" Washu quickly held out her hand to Seina.

"Y-yes, I think I might have heard about you from Tenchi-senpai..."

“I had no idea someone like you was right here. If I’d known sooner, I would’ve made you my guinea pig for all sorts of things.” Washu gripped Seina’s outstretched hand firmly.

Traditionally, it was a long-held rule at the Academy that one must never take the hand offered by a Philosopher. However, few people knew that anymore. That was because times had changed, and because Washu and Naja had gone missing.

“That’s probably why Tenchi-nii-chan didn’t let you meet him, isn’t it?”

“Ahahaha! But we’ve met now, haven’t we? I’m going to have a lot of fun with you and the little one.”

You should never shake the hand offered by a philosopher, because it carried this implication.

“Huh?”

“Heh, I don’t plan on doing anything right away. First, I need to check the ship and the data.” Washu tossed Fuku back to Seina as if discarding her, then turned on her heel and began walking back toward the house.

“Um, excuse me. Washu-sama.” Kiriko hurriedly called out to Washu.

“Hm? Is there something you need?”

“Um, the others would like to greet you…”

After all, this was an encounter with a legendary figure. Everyone was looking at Washu with nervous expressions. Ryoko, in particular, would likely have been wagging her tail so hard it would have nearly snapped off if it had been Elma standing there.

“It’s a bit of a hassle right now. It’d be better to wait until everyone’s here, and it’d just be a waste of time to do this twice.”

Philosophers were dismissive of people who didn’t interest them.

“But…”

“Besides… heh, you lot are really here for Seina-dono’s family, aren’t you? We can wait until things settle down over there. By the time Seina-dono and you get here, I’ll have finished checking the ship and the data, so let’s exchange greetings properly then. See ya.” Washu raised her hand briefly and vanished into the transport gate.

“S-sorry about that. Washu-nee-chan is, well, just that kind of person. She doesn’t mean any harm, but she does tend to do things at her own pace.”

“No, I’m the one who interrupted her when she was busy.”

“If she’s thinking of the captain’s best interests, she should prioritize Kamidake’s maintenance.”

Gyokuren's comment convinced everyone. Besides, they were used to eccentric philosophers, especially Airi. And their opponent was the ringleader, the legendary philosopher ‘Hakubi Washu’. This much was within their expectations.

“Then let’s go to Seina-chan’s house.”

“But what about Kiriko-san? Are you going to Aunt Tsukiko’s place?”

Kiriko’s house was much closer than Seina’s. It was only about a ten-minute walk.

“I’ve already contacted her, and we’re planning to drop by later. First, let’s put Seina-chan’s parents at ease. After all, it’s your first time coming home.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right. It’s a bit of a complicated situation, but… I understand.”

Seina’s parents would surely be happy to have him home, but it was definitely going to get in the way of business. It was a complicated situation for Seina, his parents, and his younger sister.

“Well, let’s go then.”

“Have a safe trip! Be careful.”

With Sasami seeing them off, Seina and the others set off toward the mountains.

“Are you sure this is okay? There’s a mid-sized bus in the village, you know?”

“It’s not that far, and it’s a waste of energy. Besides, fossil fuel-powered transportation isn’t something we should be using, right?”

Fossil fuels undoubtedly harmed the environment. And since those living on Earth weren’t in a position to restore that environment, nor did they have the technology to escape into space, those who came from space should avoid using fossil fuels as much as possible.

“But we should at least let them carry our luggage...”

Compression technology couldn’t be used on Earth. Everyone used large travel bags with casters.

“It takes up a bit of space, but the weight doesn’t bother us.” Amane lifted it lightly with her little finger.

To a bio-enhanced human, it felt no heavier than a small pouch.

“Besides, I want to see where Seina-sama grew up.”

“It’s not really that special, though…” Sensing the anticipation of the women, except for Kiriko, Seina turned around with a wry smile.

(Besides, walking around with this group is a bit….)

Everyone was wearing GP uniforms adapted for Earth, designed for hot, humid climates, but the real issue was their appearance. Honestly, even Kiriko, who grew up here, stood out on her own, but with Amane, who exuded an exotic charm, Gyokuren, with her stunning beauty, and the rest of the group, all of whom looked like celebrities, walking around in such a large group, they were bound to attract attention.

(To be honest, they'd stand out even in downtown Tokyo...)

Kiriko, walking at the back of the group, could sense Seina's unease.

(...But it wouldn't be a bad thing to show off just how amazing Seina-chan is.)

Amane and the others were perfect for the propaganda campaign to restore Seina's reputation. They possessed an undeniable dignity and refined grace. As long as Gyokuren, who could easily ruin everything, behaved herself, they wouldn't be mistaken for some shady entertainment or adult industry group.

After spending about thirty minutes crossing a small hill and emerging onto a flat plain dotted with rice paddies and farmhouses, they encountered the first person who would likely serve as the promoter Kiriko had hoped for. Since it was summer vacation, the person they met in the early afternoon on a weekday was one of Seina's friends.

"Whoa!"

Even from a distance, it was clear that Amane and the others were no ordinary people. There was no way a teenage boy could resist their allure. Seina's friend turned left off the road he was supposed to take and approached Amane and the others. But no matter how interested he was, he was too embarrassed to stare directly at the women. So, standing across the street, he tried to look at them casually. But it was only then that he finally noticed Seina walking at the front of the group.

"Whoa! It's Seina. Long time no see…"

Seizing the opportunity, the friend called out to Seina and tried to move to a safe spot. This was a reflexive reaction from someone who knew of Seina's bad luck. But the next moment, as he looked directly at Amane and the others, his eyes widened as if he were paralyzed, and all consciousness was snatched away.

"Oh, long time no see. I hope you've been well… Wait, danger!!"

Naturally, if your attention was diverted while riding a bicycle, your riding and balance would suffer. Distracted by Amane and the others, the friend staggered and crashed into a fence about a meter away. His body flew over the fence and landed in the still-lush rice paddies.

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"Oh, I see. They're coworkers from the company you're training at... Hahaha."

While brushing the mud off his pants, the friend crawled out of the rice paddy on his own,

yet he was still silently grateful for the good fortune of being able to stare straight at Amane and the others.

“But I was really surprised when I heard you’d suddenly dropped out of school to study abroad. GP Academy, huh? It doesn’t even come up in an online search, and knowing you, everyone was worried you’d been duped by some weird cult… the religious group kind.”

“It’s a special foreign-affiliated school, so hardly anyone outside knows about it. I heard about it from Tenchi-senpai, and when I accidentally wrote my name in the brochure, they just took me away, hahaha.”

“What the hell is that? Did you get caught up in some mercenary recruitment scheme? Well, that’s more like you, Seina, haha!” Having found a plausible explanation, his friend burst out laughing. He had been worried about Seina, after all.

“It’s a legitimate place, actually. They handle special security and transport jobs. I can’t go into too much detail because of confidentiality agreements, though.”

“If Kiriko-san works there too, then I guess it must be a decent place. Still, it’s amazing that you’ve lasted a whole year there. Everyone’s been betting on when you’d come back.”

“So far, I haven't had to go home.”

Seina and his friend walked toward Seina’s house across the street, catching up on each other’s lives.

“Still, Seina really is famous, isn’t he?” Amane looked around and whispered to Kiriko.

“Well, yeah.” Kiriko sighed as if giving up, realizing there was no point in explaining. “...I knew it would turn out like this.”

Seina and his friend were walking across the street, and a large crowd of onlookers had gathered to watch from a distance.

The story behind it all began when several people who knew Seina spotted his group. Each of them spread the word via text and Twitter, and before they knew it, the crowd of onlookers had swelled. Naturally, the friend currently facing off against Seina and his group couldn’t use his phone to report the situation, but in exchange, he had the honor of watching Amane and the others from the best vantage point, right up close.

Naturally, this friend was inundated with calls and emails from many friends wanting to know what was going on, but most of the questions were a bit too sensitive to relay to Amane and the others, whom he had just met. Since the distance made it impossible to whisper to Seina, there was no point in risking a bad impression with these beautiful women just to pass on the messages.

Deciding to ignore all the messages from his friends, he turned off his phone, bracing himself for complaints later. Instead... (Anyway, I have no choice but to gather as much information as possible on those incredibly beautiful ladies!) He made up his mind.

“Well, I’ll be off then.”

But as Seina neared his house, he raised his hand to him and tried to turn the corner.

“Seina-chan, just keep going straight.” Kiriko called out to Seina in a panic.

“Huh?”

“What’s up, Seina? Don’t you know you moved?”

“Moved?”

“Yeah, just up the road…”

“Wait a minute!” Kiriko crossed the street and approached him, cutting off his friend’s words.

“Sorry. Could you keep Seina-chan’s new place a secret for now? I want to surprise him a little.”

“Oh, I see. Got it.”

As Kiriko leaned in close to speak in a whisper, his heart raced, and he struggled desperately to suppress the blush rising to his cheeks. He’d known Kiriko for a long time, but she’d always been famous for her beauty, and since moving to the city, she’d become incredibly sophisticated and polished.

“A-anyway, Kiriko-san, Seina doesn’t have a cell phone, does he? The people around me are being a real pain about it.” His friend took a deep breath to calm his nerves before addressing Kiriko.

“I did get him one, but it’s just for emergencies. Besides, I can’t comment on questions about them due to work restrictions. I’m sorry.”

“If that’s the case, I’m totally fine with it! But in exchange… can I take a picture?”

“Well, I suppose we’ll have to do that to settle this. But just one photo, okay?”

“O-of course!”

Among the crowd, some people were taking photos with their cell phones from a distance, and a few even had serious cameras with telephoto lenses, but Kiriko and her team had installed optical jammers on themselves. However, to prevent the situation from escalating and to make it easier to take countermeasures later, it would be better to have at least one photo. Kiriko crossed the street again and gave Amane and the others a brief explanation, and Amane and the others smiled at the friend.

“Alright, here we go.”

The friend raised his cell phone, took a photo, and, after confirming it had come out

properly, immediately began sending the photo along with a caption.

“Hey… so, what happened to my house in the end?”

“You’ll see when you get there.”

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“……Is this my house?” Seina muttered, staring intently at the nameplate on the large gatepost.

“Yamada is a pretty common name, isn’t it?”

“It's definitely Seina-chan's house.”

“Yep! It’s definitely your house~~” His friend chimed in from a short distance away.

“B-but…?”

To be honest, the house visible from the gate wasn't particularly surprising to Seina, who had grown accustomed to Amane's house in space. However, it was a mansion that was perhaps five times larger than his previous home, on a plot of land ten times larger. Not only was the size of the house impressive, but more importantly, there was no apparent reason why someone could acquire such a house in just a year.

“Oh! Onii-chan, welcome home!”

Seina’s mental freeze, caused by his confusion, was broken by the voice of his younger sister, Yoshiko.

“Don’t just stand there, come over here quickly!!”

But Yoshiko, who had just come out of the entrance, froze upon seeing Amane and the others, just like Seina’s friend had moments before. However, Yoshiko immediately turned on her heel, ran back into the entrance, and began calling out to her parents at the top of her lungs.

“Mom! Dad! Come quick!! Big brother’s in trouble!”

“We should go inside now. It’ll be a hassle if we stay out here too long.” Kiriko glanced at the onlookers still watching from a distance, then pulled Seina’s hand as if fleeing the scene and led him into the property.

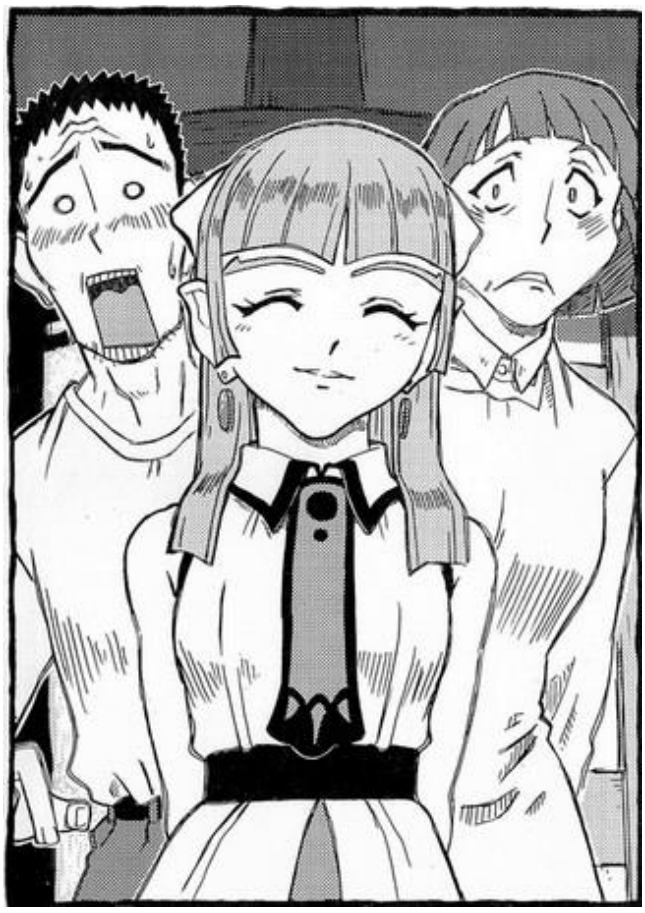
“Y-yeah. See you later.”

Waving to his friend standing a short distance away, Seina headed toward the entrance.

“Seina-nii-chan!”

Just then, appearing in front of Seina as he headed toward the entrance was...

“Neeju-chan!?”



Neeju smiled cheerfully as she walked out the door.

“W-what are you doing here??”

Just as Seina and the others stood there speechless, Kyouko and his father appeared a moment later.

“Welcome home. Have you been well…?”

Then, just like Yoshiko, Seina’s parents froze when they saw Amane and the others standing behind Seina. Only Fuku seemed happy; she leaped at Neeju, clung to her, and started wagging her tail wildly.

“...Um, why is Neeju-chan here?”

“...You’re Seina, right?”

“...Who are these people?”

Those were the words spoken simultaneously by Seina and his parents after about a minute of silence.

Chapter Five: What's Inside the Box?

“Please, come in. Welcome, and thank you for coming all this way.”

Hokuto and Yoshiko led Kiriko and the others into the large living room, where they efficiently pushed two long tables together and placed summer rush mats around them. His mother, along with Umeko-san, a neighbor whom Seina knew, began pouring the barley tea they’d brought into glasses.

“Seina-chan, have a seat.”

“Huh? Oh, okay!”

Realizing that the others couldn’t sit down until he did, Seina took the seat of honor at his father’s direction. Kiriko directed the others to their seats, and everyone sat down in an orderly fashion without a hitch.

“Let me help.”

“It's alright, Kiriko-chan. You're our guest today, so please make yourself at home.” Kyouko refused with a laugh.

“Thank you.” Kiriko said, but she still took the glasses of barley tea and began handing it out to the others.

“But why is Neeju-chan here?” Seina asked Neeju timidly.

Neeju would surely understand the rules regarding early-civilization planets, but since they hadn’t coordinated their stories, it would be problematic if there were any major discrepancies with the backstory Seina and the others remembered. First, he needed to find out what kind of explanation Neeju had given to Seina’s family.

“Minaho-sama brought me here.”

“Seina, I heard you helped Neeju-chan… Actually, everyone was suspicious that you might have gotten her involved in this.”

“No, on the contrary, I’m the one who dragged Seina-nii-chan into my troubles. He and the team protected me from it, Father.”

“Oh, Father… Well, hearing that from such a cute girl makes me a little embarrassed.”

“Did you hear anything else?” Seina asked, feeling slightly irritated at his father, who was squirming awkwardly in embarrassment.

If this were Kai, he would have punched him right then and there.

“We heard she was an important young lady from Eastern Europe, and then you came back.”

“I used to be an important young lady. That's why I don't have any bodyguards.”

Fortunately, Neeju seemed to fully understand Seina and the others’ intentions.

“Used to be!? Surely not, Neeju-sama?”

“Seina-nii-chan will be my bodyguard from now on. Here’s the contract.”

The envelope Neeju handed over bore Seto’s seal. Seina broke the seal and took out the order inside.

“...Regarding the protection and recruitment of Miss Neeju Na Melmas... I am to carry out these orders on behalf of Kamiki Seto Jurai and Masaki Airi...”

“What!? Neeju-sama?!”

“Nice to meet you all.”

“Well now, what’s with having Seina protect her? But I guess it’ll be fine as long as Kiriko-chan is there.”

"……P.S., could you also take care of the package I sent over there……?"

"Package? What is she talking about?"

"Oh, that? It was delivered along with Neeju-chan. It's a pretty big box. I wonder what's inside." Saying that, Kyouko opened the sliding door next to her. There, sitting there like a giant refrigerator, was a massive box.

(No way...!)

Seeing that, Kiriko had a hunch, or rather, a pretty good idea of what it was.

Seina peeled back the layers of seals and placed his hand on the double-hinged lid.

There was a hissing sound as air escaped from inside, and once the lid had opened about a centimeter, it began to swing open on its own.

"Ugh! Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Seina, standing directly in front of it, must have seen what was inside; he let out a little scream and leaped back.

"Wh-what's wrong? …… Eek!!"

As the lid opened halfway, everyone let out stifled screams and stared intently at the contents of the box. Kiriko, in particular, saw her past sins there, froze in place, and broke out in a cold sweat.

"R-Ringo-sama!?"

Inside was none other than Tatsuki Ringo herself. Coming to his senses, Seina hurried over to Ringo to check her pulse and breathing. Just then, right before Seina's eyes, Ringo's eyes flew wide open.

"……Oh? Is this a dream…? I can't believe Seina-sama is here. How embarrassing. I'm supposed to be working, yet I must have fallen asleep without even realizing it…" Ringo still looked half-asleep, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "It's so embarrassing to have Seina-sama see me sleeping."

"Um… Ringo-sama. Do you know where we are?"

"Where am I……!?" The drug she'd been given must have completely worn off, for Ringo's expression instantly cleared up. She must have grasped everything that

had happened in an instant; to suppress her emotions, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Se, Seina… What on earth is going on here?” His mother asked in a trembling voice.

“Seina-sama. Could this be your family home?”

In response to Ringo’s quiet confirmation, Seina nodded slightly.

“I apologize for showing you such an embarrassing sight. I'm sure you were quite surprised, but this was all the work of my mischievous boss.” Ringo stepped forward, as if to push Seina aside, then knelt down on the spot and said, “I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Tatsuki Ringo. I work for a company that does business with Mr. Yamada Seina’s firm. Seina-sama has saved our company from crisis on numerous occasions, and my boss has always said she wanted to meet his parents to formally thank them…”

“I see… So, is this how your mischievous boss…?”

“Normally, it would be proper for my boss to come here herself, but as she is a very busy woman, I have come in her stead to coincide with Seina-sama’s return home. My boss will come another time to formally introduce herself, so please forgive this arrangement.”

“Mom. Ringo-sama’s boss is a benefactor of mine, too. So…”

“It’s fine. Please raise your head. I was startled at first, thinking you were a corpse, but she seems like quite an interesting boss, doesn’t she? Ahahahaha.”

“...As expected of Seina. No, Seina-kun’s mother. You sure know how to turn things around quickly!” Amane said with admiration as she glanced at Hokuto, who was still dumbfounded.

“I’m not just any mother, after all. But honestly, I’m more surprised that such beauties came home with Seina. Even I, as a woman, can’t help but get a little flustered…”

“Well, you’re quite the smooth talker. Actually, we’re all Seina-kun’s assistants.” Amane said cheerfully as she seemed to sense that she clicked with Kyouko’s vibe.

If she’d been dealing with a child like Seina and a delicate-looking woman, she would have had to be very careful about what she said. Especially for someone as blunt as Amane, she’d been prepared to avoid talking to her more than necessary. But with this situation, it seemed she wouldn’t have to worry about what she said at all.

“Assistant? To Seina??” Kyouko looked at Amane and the others with a look of deep pity. After all, being her son’s assistant was practically the same as being a human sacrifice.

“We haven’t been introduced yet, have we? Well then… Hey, Kiriko. How long are you going to just stand there?”

“Huh?”

“Introductions. It’s your job to handle this, isn’t it?”

“R-right. You’re right.”

They had already settled things between the two of them regarding Ringo back on Jurai, but Kiriko was still deeply shaken and traumatized by the incident. And Hakuren and the others had noticed the reason for Kiriko’s distress.

“This is about that, isn’t it?” Karen whispered to Hakuren via private chat.

“Yes… It’s probably payback for when Kiriko-sama sent Ringo-sama back to Jurai before. But I heard that matter had already been settled between the two of them”

“Heh. She probably isn’t happy that it was settled without her involvement. Plus, being forced to join the battle for Seina-sama, and there are likely other reasons why she can’t have Ringo-sama staying on Jurai.”

“Killing three birds with one stone… But I’m sure covering up the evidence of embezzlement is the main goal.”

“Hey, you! How long are you going to keep acting like that?! You too, Yoshiko!”

Kyouko stood up straight, practically dragging her husband along with her. Yoshiko moved to stand beside her as well. Fortunately, since they were dealing with familiar members of the Yamada family, Kiriko had, by then, regained her composure, at least on the surface.

“Ahem! …First of all, the young lady next to me is Amane Kaunaq. On the team, she’s our specialist in vehicle operation and marksmanship.”

“Nice to meet you, Father, Mother, and Yoshiko-chan.”

“She’s really stunningly beautiful… I thought she was a model.”

“Hahaha, I used to be one.”

“I knew it.” Kyouko smiled, seeming relieved by Amane’s innate cheerfulness. It was a trait she shared with the people of Masaki Village. That gave her a sense of relief, she wasn’t just being forced to assist Seina.

“Next is Ryoko Balta. She’s our information analysis specialist.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Ryoko Balta.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“As for the next group of girls, due to security and confidentiality concerns, they’ll be using code names…”

“I’m Hakuren, the leader of this four-person team. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“These ladies were dispatched by Ringo-sama’s superiors to serve as our assistants and

backup personnel."

"Oh, is that so? I'm sorry my son has caused you trouble. Please give my regards to her superior."

"Don't worry about it. It's because Seina-sama was judged to be worth it."

"Worth it, huh...?"

For Kyouko, the word 'worth' as it applied to her son was the most unrealistic concept imaginable.

"My name is Karen. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hakuren's team are all-rounders with high proficiency in every ability. If anything, we're more like their support staff."

"Kiriko-sama and the others are superior to us in specialized abilities."

"I see… My child is so lucky to have people like that looking out for him."

"So, Auntie. Next is Gyokuren..."

"Nice to meet you... Please take care of me." Gyokuren bowed deeply, just like the others when Kiriko introduced her.

Yet that single gesture alone exuded an aura so striking that it drew sighs not only from Seina's parents but even from Kiriko and the others, who knew Gyokuren well.

"...My, my. So there really is such a thing as overwhelming beauty. Amane-san is the same way..." Kyouko let out a deep sigh, feeling as if her knees had gone weak, and whispered to her husband beside her, "Hey, with people like this around, I wonder if our child's self-control will hold up," she whispered.

"Well, with people like this… I'd be so overwhelmed I wouldn't be able to do a thing." His father, who had been silent until then, managed to utter with a groan.

"Dad and Mom, you're being rude to everyone." Seina, who hadn't the faintest idea that he was being viewed with romantic interest, said with a puzzled expression.

His mother was the only one who didn't miss the fact that all the women had simultaneously fixed slightly meaningful gazes on Seina.

(Wait a minute! ...What!?)

"Huh? What's wrong with you?" Hokuto looked at Kyouko, who had suddenly fallen silent, with a puzzled expression.

"Oh, no, it's nothing. Anyway, now that the introductions are over…"

"Mom, there's one more person."

“Huh!?”

That voice came not only from Kyouko, but from nearly everyone present.

“...My name is Suiren.” In a voice so soft it was almost inaudible, Suiren bowed.

“Aaaaaah! Suiren, I’m so sorry!”

“It was because of what happened with Ringo-sama, and Gyokuren went and made a weird show of herself…”

Kiriko bowed her head to Suiren, and the others scrambled to back her up. However, Suiren herself was used to this, so she took a sip of barley tea with a completely unfazed expression,

“It’s nothing out of the ordinary, so I’m fine. Besides, there’s one more person, Fuku-chan hasn’t been introduced yet,” Suiren looked over at Fuku, who was being held by Neeju.

“Myaa!”

“Whoa! Whoa! I've been wondering about that little one, you know~~” Yoshiko, who had been sitting quietly until then, suddenly dropped to her knees and looked at Fuku with sparkling eyes.

“Her name is Fuku, and, um…”

Before Seina could explain, Yoshiko approached Neeju and stared intently at Fuku.

“Hey, Neeju-chan, can I hold her?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Yoshiko took Fuku from Neeju and stroked her head. Fuku seemed to realize that Yoshiko was Seina’s younger sister and wagged her tail happily.

“Onii-chan, is she yours? Hey, can I have her?”

“Give her to you? Well, that’s a bit…”

If it were an ordinary pet, that might be one thing, but Fuku was a spaceship terminal. She wasn’t exactly something he could just casually give away.

“Whaaaat? Anyway, is it really okay for you to keep her by your side?”

“Yoshiko-chan, Fuku is our teammate.” Kiriko, who had been watching the siblings’ exchange with a wry smile and said in a soothing tone. To Kiriko, Yoshiko was like a little sister.

“Your teammate?”

“You know about drug-sniffing dogs and animals that assist humans with their work, right?

She’s a new type of experimental subject, trained exclusively for Seina-chan. As proof… see that red gem on her forehead?”

“It’s true… it’s beautiful.”

On Fuku's forehead was a gem known as ‘Vision Blood,’ which resembled the finest ruby. Yoshiko gazed in awe at its beauty.

“But an experimental subject… you aren’t doing anything terrible to her, are you?”

“Don’t worry, Yoshiko-chan. It’s nothing like what you’re imagining. As proof, she absolutely adores Seina-chan.”

“Onii-chan? But she’s so attached to me.”

“Seina-chan, why don’t you try calling Fuku-chan over?”

“Fuku, come here.”

“Myaa!”

The moment Seina called her, Fuku leaped out of Yoshiko’s arms, dashed straight over to Seina, and playfully rubbed against him.

“Well, I want to play too! Fuku-chan, come to onee-chan.”

“Mya?”

Fuku glanced at Yoshiko for a moment, but the comfort of Seina’s strokes made her purr and she snuggled up to him.

“Oh my, looks like Yoshiko lost this round.”

“Mmm... But Fuku-chan really does look happy.”

Yoshiko pouted a little, but seeing Fuku cuddling up to Seina, she immediately smiled with a look that said, “Oh well.”

“Just play with her while she’s here. She seems to like you, after all.”

“Okay!”

Seeing his younger sister Yoshiko’s happy face, Seina’s expression brightened as well. Kiriko and the others watched Seina and Yoshiko with a fond smile.

(T-This is exactly what I thought! It’s still too early to jump to conclusions, but the fact that they’re colleagues means they know about Seina’s luck, right? Even taking into account the fact that they’re acting like adults, if they can still make that kind of expression after witnessing Seina’s terrible streak of bad luck!) Kyouko’s eyes glinted like a predator that had spotted its prey.

Seina had been on the receiving end of people's fear and malice head-on, but Kyouko, too, had faced the same things indirectly, and sometimes directly. She was extremely sensitive to whether someone's attitude reflected their true feelings or was just polite niceties.

(Though there's a chance they might cave under the pressure like Kiriko-chan did and distance themselves from that boy, so I can't get my hopes up too high, but still…) Kyouko was well aware that Kiriko had once run away from Seina. However, after observing their interaction up to this point, she was convinced that Kiriko was willing to face Seina again.

(It seems sending that boy outside wasn't a waste of time… but…) Kyouko looked around at the women's faces once more.

(……Yeah, I really shouldn't get my hopes up too high.)

Surrounded by these beauties, the kind one rarely even saw on TV, and their otherworldly aura, Kyouko felt as though her own desires were utterly unrealistic. Still, it was a stroke of luck that Seina wasn't being rejected outright.

"Well then, I suppose we should start preparing for the evening welcome party. Dad, please head back to the shop."

"Y-yeah, you're right. Well, I'll be off then."

Hokuto, who was incredibly nervous surrounded by such a huge crowd of stunning beauties, seized the opportunity and practically fled the room. Besides, even if he tried to talk to them, the only thing they'd have in common was Seina, and it was better to save that for the welcome party they'd be having that night.

"Hey, Dad, what's going on with the shop? The other shop was closed, but…?"

"Hm? Oh, about that…"

"Ta-daaa! Big brother, look at this!" Yoshiko suddenly unfolded a newspaper insert in front of Seina.

"...What!?"

The ad Yoshiko showed him featured a photo of a medium-sized supermarket with the words 'Super Store Yamada' printed in huge letters.

"It's a store that sells groceries, daily necessities, and clothing. Isn't that amazing?" Yoshiko puffed out her chest proudly.

"B-but… it says it opened three months ago. How on earth did that little general store grow into something this big?"

"You know that when you got home from school, customers would stop coming to the store, right?"

"So, you're saying it turned out like this because I've been away for so long?"

“We were surprised too, you know. But on top of that, it’s also thanks to the money you send home.”

“The money I sent? No, but the money I sent...”

Thanks to living with Amane and the others, he hardly spend anything on food or utilities. Even though there was the issue of NB’s wasteful spending, he sent half his salary home. But even so, the amount was nothing to write home about.

“I, I'm sorry, Seina-chan. ...I didn't want to say anything, but in addition to your regular salary, you also get a bonus for your work. So, that's why...” Kiriko looked at Ringo awkwardly.

(……Seto-sama saw this coming.)

Hakuren and the others stared silently at Kiriko, who looked so flustered it was almost pitiful.

“Ringo-sama previously negotiated with the government and various companies and secured a substantial reward for us… so…”

“It was a large sum for Seina-sama to hold, so we had Kiriko-san manage it until the time came when it was needed. I’m sorry for acting on my own.” Ringo continued speaking, as if to shield Kiriko, who had suddenly fallen silent. While it was an act of kindness on Ringo’s part, it only deepened Kiriko’s self-loathing and further gnawed at her wounds.

By this point, not only the perceptive Amane, but even Ryoko and Neeju, who wasn’t very familiar with the details, had realized that something similar to this situation must have happened between Kiriko and Ringo in the past.

“Ah, no. As for me, not at all…”

“I’m the one who made you worry.”

Kyouko pushed past Seina.

“If I let this kid carry that much cash, he’d either get swarmed by weirdos, get scammed, or drop it somewhere. It’d be gone in no time. Still, I just don’t get how my kid could be receiving such a huge sum of money… I suppose it’s okay because it’s coming through Kiriko-chan, but if it were sent directly by my kid, I’d assume it was definitely linked to some crime and refuse to accept it.”

“...I understand how you feel.”

“Well, I’ll have you explain the whole scheme to me in detail tonight. Come on! Don’t just stand there spacing out! We’re already behind on the financial audit as it is.”

“Financial audit!?” At those words, Ringo’s expression changed.

“We’re doing the financial audit for the first three months since we opened. It’s for the bank

report. But since the scale of the store is on a whole different level than before, it's taking a bit of time. The store opening advisor brought in… Ah, that's not really something I should be telling a guest. Well, even for those of us who are used to it, it takes a fair amount of time, so please don't worry about it."

"I work in the accounting department, so would it be alright if I helped you out?" For Ringo, it was almost instinctive. Like a predator pouncing on its prey, she jumped at the offer. Of course, she also wanted to help Seina.

"Well, but…"

Seeing Kyouko looking a little uneasy, Hakuren and the others, who knew Ringo well, struggled to hold back their laughter.

"Auntie, I highly recommend letting her help!"

"……I-is that so? Well, if Kiriko-chan says so, I suppose I'll ask you to." Kyouko blurted without thinking upon seeing Kiriko's earnest expression.

"But the accounting..."

"You're going to check it too, aren't you? Well, just stick with the excuse that she's a distant relative. It wouldn't feel right to just do whatever they say, would it?"

"...You're right. Well then, just do what you can."

"Father, Mother, please let us help in any way we can." Hakuren seized the moment and bowed her head.

"I can't possibly let our guests do any more than that."

"We can't have our superiors working while their subordinates rest. Besides, we came here to repay Seina-sama's kindness. Your concern is unnecessary." Hakuren said as she glanced briefly at Kiriko.

Realizing what Hakuren meant, Kiriko nodded slightly and said, "Auntie. All of us prefer to keep active, so please do put us to work. I think this is a great opportunity for you to see what kind of people Seina-chan's assistants are."

"It's just so different from what I'm used to… It feels like I'm being tricked by a fox or a tanuki. But if you're willing to go that far, I suppose being tricked isn't so bad after all."

"Okay, Karen, you can help me with the welcome party tonight. We'll decide on the others after we see how things are going at the store." Once things got going, Kiriko was like a fish in water. Partly wanting to put Ringo out of her mind, Kiriko eagerly took charge.

"Um, Kiriko-san... what about me...?"

"It's obvious you're not supposed to go there! Yoshiko, you're supposed to be keeping Neeju-chan and Fuku-chan company and watching over Seina!" Kyouko's expression was

truly demonic.

“Got it! Okay, Neeju-chan and Fuku-chan, I’ll show you around the garden. Onii-chan, you just hang out on the veranda and watch.”

“...Okay.”

Smiling fondly at the dejected Seina, Kiriko and the others went outside with Seina’s parents.

Chapter Six: Invitation to the Den of Evil: Welcome, Mr. Guinea Pig!

“Well, well… this is some impressive data.”

Standing in front of the adjustment tank containing Kamidake, Washu looked at Kamidake’s main data with a look of rapture.

“Hah! Hahaha… Seina-dono really is the best bug checker ever. To think he managed to collect nearly twice as much data in such a short time as Ryo-Ohki did in over five thousand years… Wait, no, no. I need to do a quick check first.”

Washu began lightly scrolling through the data, but immediately stopped at a particular entry.

“Huh?! What's this?!”

To the average person, it was just a collection of ordinary measurement graphs, but Washu’s expression clearly darkened.

“Target vessel: Daidoros. Captain: Tarrant Shank… a descendant of the Shank Guild? If so, it might be possible…!?”

At the sound of a knock, Washu began scrolling through the data again.

“Come in.”

“Washu-chan, is now a good time?”

“Oh my, it's unusual to see you here, Tenchi-dono.” Washu said with a sly grin.

Ever since she treated him like a guinea pig when they first met, Tenchi had avoided Washu’s research facility. But…

“I heard Seina-kun went back home, so I just…”

Apparently, when it came to Seina, that was not the case.

“I completely forgot to tell you. My apologies. I suppose this is just a case of Seina-dono’s

bad luck, ahahahaha.”

Washu pulled out a chair and offered it to Tenchi. Tenchi cautiously examined the chair, then sat down as if giving up. Fortunately, there were no traps in the chair.

“Washu-chan, what do you think about Seina-kun’s bad luck?”

“I hear he’s like a younger brother to you.”

“Well... Kai-kun and I have been together since we were little, and I was practically an only child myself. Besides, Seina-kun is...” Tenchi tried to share his memories of Seina, but the overwhelming emotions he felt made him choked up and he stammered. This revealed the depth of Tenchi's feelings for Seina.

“...I really want him to be happy.”

"Heh heh... Everyone who knows Seina-dono makes the same face. Seto-dono is like that too. Airi-dono also... And there are many others as well."

“……”

“Seina-dono’s probability bias is among the highest figures I’ve ever seen. Of course, there are always those higher up, but there are absolutely no cases of anyone surviving to that age. Seina-dono’s figures, too, are numbers that should make survival impossible.”

“But Seina-kun is alive!” Tenchi raised his voice as if desperately trying to refute Washu’s words.

“Ah, that’s because he has other special abilities.”

“Special abilities?”

“Avoiding probability anomalies… An exceptional ability to evade danger. It’s overwhelming, you could even call it godlike.”

“An overwhelming ability to avoid danger...”

“Well, the sad thing is that it’s completely offset by his overwhelmingly devilish bad luck, making him a really unlucky kid.”

“……Sigh……” Tenchi pitied Seina and breathed a deep sigh.

“Well, it’s not all bad news. That overwhelming ability to avoid danger, and the fact that he’s kept his sanity despite such a biased probability. That’s all thanks to you being there, Tenchi-dono.”

“Huh!?”

“It’s simply because Kiriko-dono, Tsukiko-dono, Kai-dono, and the residents of Masaki Village were there to protect Seina-dono’s heart. You could say that his ability to avoid

danger is largely the result of acquired learning, supported by his sound mind."

"I see... But even so, the fact that he's incredibly unlucky doesn't change, does it?"

"Well... hmm? No, maybe!" Washu, as if struck by an idea, began checking some data.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm pretty sure Elma was mentioned in Airi-dono's secretary's report… there it is!"

Washu stared intently at the data and said, "We shouldn't get our hopes up too high, but it looks like we might be able to do something."

"Really!?" Tenchi's expression brightened instantly.

"Really, really! Let's start with the people closest to him."

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"Yes... Yes, I understand. I'll let everyone know." Kiriko hung up her phone and slipped it into the holster on her belt. Then she went back to washing the vegetables she'd been prepping.

"Karen, Washu-sama told me that we need to get our physical data checked tomorrow, anytime is fine. Since it concerns Seina-chan, she said everyone must get it done."

"For Seina-sama? Yes, understood. I'll let Hakuren and the others know as well. By the way, Kiriko-sama, regarding the menu for the prepared dishes we'll be serving at the shop that we were discussing earlier, I still think we should consider raising the cooks' ranks."

"Hmm… That would certainly be ideal. What do you think, Auntie?"

"I do want to do that in the future. Really, it would be wonderful if we could find someone like Kiriko-chan or Karen-san." Kyouko said, gazing admiringly at Karen's deft movements.

"Compared to Kiriko-sama, I'm nothing…"

"Your work at the shop was superb. Kiriko-chan must think so too, since she requested you, right?"

"Yes." Kiriko nodded at Karen.

When Karen visited the shop, she took an interest in the prepared foods and lunch box section and eagerly checked out various items. The head chef, who had initially looked suspicious and seemed dissatisfied, was so impressed by Karen's skill that he was left speechless, and by the end, he was even asking her for advice.

Today, she had simply revised the contents of the prepared dishes and lunch boxes currently being served at the shop before heading home, and decided to create test

versions of the prepared dish menu while preparing for the welcome party.

“Anyway, today I’ll be making a few dishes from our previous menu that were well-received, adapted for the fall season, so please give them a try. I'll also be giving you some other recipes that might be useful, so please consult with your chefs and try using them if they seem appropriate.”

“That’s a huge help. If it’s made by Kiriko-chan and Karen-san, it’s sure to be good. The only question is whether we can reproduce it.”

“I’ll tweak the recipes a bit to account for making large quantities… but if you’d like, should I give everyone a little demonstration? Of course, it’ll just be some simple tips, nothing too burdensome, but I think even that will make a big difference.”

“That would be wonderful. In fact, we've been hearing similar requests from people on the ground. So, I'd really appreciate it.”

“Sure thing!”

Karen looked like a young boy, but the way she smiled shyly and happily was so adorable Kyouko almost wanted to give her a hug.

(She’s so talented… I can’t wait to see how the other girls are doing at the shop.)

Thinking of Ringo and the others who were likely working at the shop, a smile slipped across Kyouko’s face.

Just then, “Myaa! Myaa!” Fuku ran into the kitchen.

“Oh? What’s the matter? Are you thirsty?”

“Oh, Auntie. Fuku-chan always comes to watch when I start cooking in the kitchen. It seems she enjoys watching me do all sorts of things.”

“Oh my, just like a little kid. Well, as long as she doesn’t get too close to your feet or near the stove or knives, she’ll be fine, won’t she?”

Little kids couldn’t sit still, so it was actually pretty dangerous for them to be in the kitchen while cooking.

“Yes, she’s always very quiet and just watches. Please let her stay in a spot where she can see the whole kitchen from a slightly elevated position.”

“Yeah. In that case, how about the top of the fridge?”

“That sounds good. Okay, Fuku-chan, you can watch from up there.”

“Myaa!”

“Let me just wipe off the dust first.”

Kyouko stepped onto a small step stool and carefully wiped down the top of the large refrigerator with a rag. Then she folded a towel and placed it there to use as a cushion.

“Come on up, little one.”

Kyouko took Fuku and placed her on the towel so she could see what was happening.

“See? You can see everything clearly from here, right?”

“Myaa!” Fuku wagged her tail and looked around happily.

“Excuse me, Auntie.”

“It’s okay. With a little visitor here, I’ve got to give it my all. Well then, let’s get back to work.”

“Hey, Mom, Mom! Have you seen Fuku-chan?”

A little later, Yoshiko and Neeju came running in.

“She’s on top of the fridge. She wants to watch us cook.”

“See, Yoshiko-chan? I told you she’d be here.”

“She really does enjoy watching them cook.”

Yoshiko seemed to understand as she watched Fuku intently observing the cooking from atop the refrigerator.

“I’d like to help too. Is that okay?”

“Oh, you're more than welcome, Neeju-chan.”

“Then, Neeju-sama, please help with this.”

Joining Neeju, Yoshiko also took a peeler and stood next to Karen, helping to peel the vegetables.

Meanwhile, Seina was alone in his room, just as Yoshiko had told him.

“So I’m supposed to just stay here quietly, right?”

His room, which was larger and cleaner than before, was a bleak place with nothing in it except for his familiar desk. Seina had never been one to hold onto things. The only things he'd kept for a long time were his desk and a bicycle called the 'Kai Special.' Everything else ended up being broken, lost, or stolen.

It wasn't just the size of the house; though he'd been bewildered by the size of his room at first, once he got used to it, he even began to feel it was cramped.

"All things considered, I guess I've just gotten used to how spacious it is at Amane's."

Seina threw open the curtains and the sliding doors leading to the balcony. Looking out at the rural landscape from the second floor, he finally felt liberated from that sense of confinement. But that was purely a visual sensation.

"I can't do anything here… or rather, I'm not allowed to. If I move, I'll drag someone else into it. So I have no choice but to stay put in my room…"

To Seina, his room was like a prison. The only place where Seina could feel free was Masaki Village.

Just then, Seina's cell phone began to vibrate.

"Hm? Oh, right. They made me bring this for use on Earth."

The moment he turned it on, he heard Kai's angry shout coming from the phone.

"Seina! Aren't we supposed to be best friends?!"

"...Oh, it's Kai... What's with the sudden call?"

"If you're back, shouldn't you be introducing me to those super-gorgeous ladies first? That's what best friends do!"

"Oh, I see. Got it. Just to be clear, those ladies are my coworkers. They help me out with all sorts of things."

"...Your colleagues? That's truly unfortunate. But they're all such beautiful women. Even if they quit, they'll surely find plenty of other jobs, so it'll be alright, ha ha ha!"

"Strangely enough, they've formed a team with me even though they know who I am. Honestly, I'm surprised they don't find me a nuisance, but they're doing their best to look after me."

"What?! Are they really like goddesses? Then introduce me to them right away! No… you must! You have to!"

"Since I'm technically Kiriko-san's subordinate, I think she'll introduce them to you. She mentioned she might be going over there too, so when she does…"

"No, I'm heading over there right now! Hey, Mom~! Seina really wants me to come, so I

don’t need dinner~… Guh!”

Just as Kai’s voice faded into the distance, he heard a familiar thud, followed by the sound of footsteps approaching. He could tell exactly what was going on.

“Hello, Seina-chan?”

“Aunt… T-Tsukiko, it’s been a while.”

For a moment, Seina’s voice involuntarily trembled. It was because he’d just recalled the kiss with Kuisu, who had disguised herself as Tsukiko on Jurai, and the feelings Tsukiko harbored for Seina, which Kuisu had confessed after breaking her disguise.

“I’m sorry for the trouble Kai caused. It’s been a year, so you must have a lot to catch up on with your family, right? Put their minds at ease about everything. You can come visit us anytime, but please make sure to take good care of your parents.”

Her voice was as gentle as ever, and he couldn’t sense anything out of the ordinary in it. Of course, speaking over the phone, and with Seina having absolutely no experience with romance, there was no way he could pick up on such subtle differences, so he tried his best to stay calm and talk to her as he always did.

“It feels like doing nothing is the best way to be a good son… But I was told not to go near the shop, and they won’t let me do anything right now, so I’ve just been staying in my room.”

“Just showing them your cheerful face is enough.”

“Kiriko-san is downstairs, would you like to talk with her?”

“It’s okay. I’m in no rush, and I’ve got a pot on the stove. Well then, I’m looking forward to seeing you, Seina-chan.”

“Okay!”

After hanging up the phone, Seina felt the tension melt away and took a deep breath. Tsukiko’s words, “I’m looking forward to seeing you,” had unexpectedly made Seina’s heart race.

“Let’s forget what Kuisu-san said! She was just teasing me! It’s fine to keep things with Aunt Tsukiko just as they are; it would be worse if things got awkward between us.”

It would be harder for Seina to do anything that might cloud Tsukiko’s gentle smile. Someone who smiled at him like a mother or an older sister was a rare treasure to Seina.

“There’s still so much I need to learn so I don’t become a burden to everyone. I can’t think about romance until I’m fully grown…”

Not being a burden to anyone. Seina wondered when that day would ever come, and felt a touch of despair.

“Well, let’s just believe that day will come… That’s it! Since I don’t have anything else to do anyway, I’ll go see Tenchi-senpai first thing tomorrow morning. If my schedule works out with Kiriko-san, I’ll probably get to see Aunt Tsukiko too… Yeah, that’s the plan!” Seina stretched his arms wide, as if to shake off his gloomy mood.

“Seina-chan, can I come in?” Kiriko called out from outside the room as she knocked.

“!!… K-Kiriko-san? Come in.”

“Seina-chan, about dinner… the store closes at seven, so it looks like everyone won’t be back until around eight. So…?”

Peering in, Kiriko noticed that Seina’s cheeks were flushed and he was sweating.

“Are you feeling sick? Or are you tired?”

“Aaaaaah, no, it’s just… Actually, I got a call from Kai a little while ago… and I also spoke with Aunt Tsukiko…”

“...I see.”

Kiriko understood everything at once. She could see right through Kai’s actions. And she knew exactly why Seina’s cheeks were flushed.

“Kai said he was coming over to see Amane and the others, but your mom stopped him. Well… that’s about it.”

“So, what did my mom say?”

“She said, ‘It’s fine to go over any time, but see you family first.’”

“I see...”

“But there’s nothing for me to do here, so I’m thinking of dropping by Tenchi-senpai’s place tomorrow.”

“...I suppose so. Your family seemed relieved to see you, and besides, Washu-sama told us to stop by because there’s something she wants to look into, so it works out perfectly. Once that’s done, let’s go to Masaki Village together.”

“Got it. But ‘something she wants to look into’… does that mean me, too?”

“She didn’t mention you specifically. It seems it’s necessary for verifying ability values related to Kamidake operations, so I suppose she probably needs ours too. Seina-chan’s data was already collected anyway. …Oh, right. Continuing from what we were talking about earlier, dinner will be late because of the shop, so if you can’t wait, would you like to grab a light snack?”

“No, I’m fine for another hour or so.”

“Okay, I understand. Just be patient for a little longer then.”

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“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!”

It was a spectacular sight to see the dishes being laid out one after another on the large table in the living room. With more people than usual, and since it was also a welcome party, the spread was luxurious and varied. Fuku watched the scene with great excitement from atop the stacked cushions in the corner of the room. And there was one other person, Kyouko, who was also looking at the food with satisfaction.

“Yeah! It looks really good. It looks great, and best of all, it tastes delicious, so there's nothing more to say. Fuku-chan, you think so too, right?” Kyouko stroked Fuku's head, who was excited.

“Mya~~n, myan myan!” Fuku meowed as she rubbed her head against her hand.

Just then, a faint murmur of voices could be heard, followed by the sound of the front door opening.

“We’re home~”

“Oh, they're back. Fuku-chan, could you go get Seina for me?”

“Myaa!”

The moment she heard Kyouko’s words, Fuku darted out into the hallway like a bullet.

Chapter Seven: The Yamada House: That Night

“Okay, it looks like everyone's here.”

Since Amane and Hakuren had returned home, taken their baths, and sat down at the table first, it was past 8:30 by the time everyone was gathered.

“I’m sorry we’re late, Seina-sama.”

“It’s fine. You were helping out with the housework, after all. I’m the one who’s sorry for all the trouble.”

“Come on, come on, let’s save that talk for later! Have you handed out all the glasses?” Kyouko said as she looked around at everyone.

After making sure everyone had a glass, “Well then, Dad,”

“Everyone, thank you so much for everything today. I feel terrible about having to put Seina’s assistants to work, but thanks to you all, we achieved results beyond our

expectations. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you once again. Since the shop is closed tomorrow, please take it easy and enjoy yourselves tonight. Well then…" Hokuto raised his glass.

He looked around at everyone and said, "Cheers!" The usually quiet Hokuto raised his voice as if he were truly excited.

"Cheers!"

Following his lead, everyone raised their glasses and drank the contents. Some just took a sip to wet their lips, while others downed theirs in one gulp.

"Now then, Father." Ryoko poured beer into Hokuto's empty glass.

"Thanks a lot."

"Here you go." Amane placed a small plate of food in front of him.

Even though it was only his first drink, Seina's father's face was already bright red.

"Come on, Mother."

"Thank you. But Gyokuren-san and the others are our guests…"

Kyouko felt somewhat overwhelmed by Gyokuren's allure. Even though Gyokuren was a younger woman of the same sex, Kyouko's cheeks were flushed, and she was staring off into space. To be fair, Gyokuren was actually holding back quite a bit. But Kyouko couldn't withstand the pressure, so she set down her glass and asked for a refill. If she didn't, she probably would have dropped the glass.

"Mother, even we, who are used to Gyokuren, sometimes get 'overwhelmed,' so please don't worry about it. Besides, she understands this herself, so it's fine if you treat her a little roughly." Karen whispered to the bewildered Kyouko with a wry smile.

"T-that's a relief to hear. Hey, Karen-san… can I ask you something?" Kyouko cleared away the empty beer bottles and carried them to the kitchen.

Karen pretended to help and followed behind her.

"It's not just you, but with all these charming girls around, is my son going to be okay?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, is he… well, not doing anything inappropriate with Gyokuren-san… or rather, with you all? If he does anything weird, you're allowed to beat him senseless. He's pretty tough, you know."

"Heh. Don't worry about Seina-sama. Kiriko-san is here too, and he's so rational it's almost a problem… Oh, no… I mean…" Karen blushed slightly and looked down.

“Rational to the point of being a problem… Hmm. Does that mean he’s not like a typical boy his age?”

“Actually, I’ve been talking to the other girls, and it seems like Seina-sama doesn’t seem to consider at all the possibility that someone might have feelings for him, or that someone might actually like him…”

“That… might be true. Even I find it hard to believe that he’s even acquainted with people like you, Karen-san.”

“But all of us… We all respect Seina-sama. We admire the strength of his spirit, how he grew up so honest and healthy despite all that bad luck.”

“It wasn’t all on his own, though. It’s thanks to Kiriko-chan and the others supporting him. And now… it’s thanks to Karen-san and the others being here.”

“Thank you. It’s just… I wish he’d show a little more interest in things appropriate for his age…” Karen blushed even more and looked at Kyouko. “That’s what we all think. At least, no one here would object to that.”

“...Ah, it’s almost like I’m dreaming. Thank you. But that’s all I can say. Given his nature, I can’t force or criticize you all. Well, he’s still a child, and there’s time before you reach a conclusion. So please, feel free to spend time with him without worrying about us.”

“Yes.”

“Hey, you two! What are you whispering about over there? It’s not fair to try to sneak ahead of everyone else.” Amane said as she poked her head out from behind the partition, slightly tipsy.

Amane and the others could hear every word of the conversation in the kitchen. And Karen’s words reflected how they all felt. So, despite the content of her words, Amane’s expression was cheerful.

“Amane-san, you’re going a bit too fast.” Karen said as she pushed Amane back toward the living room, handed out fresh bottles of beer, and collected the empty plates.

“Come on, Karen-chan, you’re our guest, so sit down, sit down.” Hokuto seemed to be relaxing more and more, and he started talking more.

“These side dishes are also test runs, so I’ll ask for your feedback later.”

“Come on, Kiriko, don’t bring work into a welcome party like this.” Amane looked sulky and dissatisfied.

But most of the others were taking notes while eating.

“Kiriko-onee-chan, everything is so delicious. Right, Neeju-chan?”

“Kiriko-san and the others’ cooking skills are top-notch, so even if you ask for my opinion, I

can only speak from my personal preference.”

Neeju and Yoshiko are also happily discussing things while looking at their notes.

“That's fine with me. ...Oh? Is Fuku-chan full already?”

“Everyone kept urging her to try this and that... I guess she got a little carried away by the party atmosphere.”

“Myaa~~n...”

With her belly full to bursting, Fuku was lying on a seat made of a towel placed in a box, when she let out a big yawn.

“Oh, is Fuku-chan sleepy?”

“Fumya! Mya~n!”

When Kiriko asked that, Fuku scrambled to her feet and clung to Seina. Perhaps she remembered the previous subsystem setup, or maybe she was wary of being made to sleep alone.

“Hey, Fuku-chan. Do you want to sleep with big sister? Let's sleep together with Neeju-chan, too.”

“Sure, okay. It’s been a while since I slept with Fuku-chan, hasn’t it?”

“Mya... myaa.” After gazing at Yoshiko and Neeju, who were smiling brightly, Fuku looked up at Seina.

“My room is right next to Yoshiko’s.”

“Myau.” Fuku nodded slightly, seemingly relieved by Seina's words.

“Hey, onii-chan. How does Fuku-chan feel about baths?”

“It’s fine. She love taking baths.”

“Really? Then let’s take a bath together and then go to sleep. …We’ll go ahead.” Yoshiko picked up Fuku and left the room with Neeju.

“Good night.”

The moment Yoshiko and the others closed the sliding door, the noise of the party returned.

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“Wow, what a spacious bath!” Neeju exclaimed in admiration at the large bathroom, considering the size of the house.

She took a deep breath, admiring the tasteful, though not extravagant, interior and the

pleasant scent of wood.

(It reminds me of the bath at the house we stayed in on Kamidake. I wonder if it's because it's the hometown of the Empress of Jurai?)

"It's pretty big for a regular house, isn't it? When we bought this place, Mom had the kitchen remodeled to be larger, and Dad had the bathroom expanded."

Yoshiko and Neeju sat side by side and began washing themselves.

"Did you make any requests about the house, Yoshiko-chan?"

"I got the best room in the house, so I don't really have any complaints. After all, the amenities are much better than in our old house. Hey, Fuku-chan, don't move."

"Mya, mya~n"

Covered in suds, Fuku squirmed as if Yoshiko's fingers were tickling her.

"Come on, close your eyes."

"Mya~n"

Waiting until Fuku had closed her eyes tightly, Yoshiko quickly washed and rinsed her face with warm water.

"Next up, your ears."

"The way you're washing Fuku-chan reminds me so much of Seina-onii-chan."

"Huh? ...R-really?" Yoshiko blushed shyly.

"Yeah, the way your eyes look is exactly the same. That's why Fuku-chan is so relaxed."

"……"

"Do you dislike being told you look like your older brother?"

"Not at all. Okay, Fuku-chan, I'm going to rinse you off." Yoshiko carefully washed Fuku's fur, then rinsed the soap off her own body.

"So this is Fuku-chan's bath."

Yoshiko scooped hot water into a tub, placed Fuku inside, set a chair next to the bathtub, placed the tub with Fuku on top of it, and got into the tub with Neeju.

"This way, we're about the same height, right?"

From inside the bathtub and inside the tub, Yoshiko smiled at Fuku from eye level. But Fuku didn't seem to like that, and jumped into the bathtub where Yoshiko and Neeju were.

“F-Fuku-chan!?”

“Myau!”

Swimming and diving with great skill, she swam around the spacious tub at dolphin-like speeds before popping her head up right in front of Yoshiko.

“Whoa, you scared me! …Fuku-chan, you’re a really good swimmer, aren’t you?”

“You weren't this good when I last saw you... You've gotten so much better.”

“Mya~~n”

Fuku floated on her back on the surface of the water, looking quite proud of herself, like a sea otter. Yoshiko and Neeju stared at Fuku for a while.

“...Hey, Neeju-chan, what do you think of my big brother?”

“I love him♡”

“Wow... No hesitation? You know about my brother's bad luck, right?”

“Of course♡”

“...I give up.” Yoshiko bowed her head to Neeju.

“Hehe. But I think everyone who came with Seina-nii-chan would give the same answer.”

“I see... That’s a relief.” Leaning her head against the edge of the bathtub, Yoshiko said with a look of relief.

“Myaa!”

“Fuku-chan said so, too.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“What about you, Yoshiko-chan? Seina-nii-chan said he felt bad because he couldn’t play with you.”

“Yeah… a long time ago, my mom bought me some new clothes, and I went to show them to him… But just as he was about to say something, a stone kicked up by a car’s tire hit him right in the forehead… There was so much blood it even splattered on my clothes.”

“Ugh... Wow. That must have been terrible.”

“I was so shocked... But while I was crying, my brother, looking pale, desperately tried to comfort me, saying, 'It’s okay.' But that was the only time I ever touched him. Mom told me not to go near him... Well, I guess that was only natural, but at the time, I didn’t understand why... I was so sad.”

“You really loved your big brother, Seina, didn't you?”

“I guess that's when it started? Whenever he saw my face, he always smiled at me. Even when he was hospitalized with a terrible injury, even though he was in pain and suffering… Even though he clearly looked like he wasn’t feeling well, he’d give me a big smile and say, ‘I’m fine!’… So, I just can't bring myself to look sad around him.” Yoshiko's face contorted, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Yoshiko-chan?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Yoshiko said, then washed her face with hot water, splashing it on to hide her tears.

“...Myau” Fuku peered at Yoshiko’s face with concern. “Myau”

“It’s okay, Fuku-chan. I’m sorry, Neeju-chan, I just get a little emotional remembering the past… Yeah, I’m fine now!” Yoshiko shook her head to shake off the tears, then broke into a bright smile.

“Mom used to say that if Kiriko-san hadn’t shown up, who knows what would have happened. I was still little back then, so I didn’t really understand, but today Neeju-chan and the others came … Oh, and Fuku-chan too, of course. My brother’s vibe has changed so much.”

“Did he look cooler?”

“Hehe, just a little. But he seemed so much more grown-up… To be honest, when I heard my brother was coming back, I was a little scared.”

“Scared?”

“Ever since my brother left, business and life have been going so smoothly, it’s been like a dream…”

“I see. I completely understand how you feel, and you don’t need to feel guilty about it.”

"But when my brother came home, the house became so much brighter, it was astonishing. Ah, when I saw Mom and the others looking flustered while holding my big brother, I realized that's exactly why Kiriko-san and the others came. …Thank you so much, Neeju-chan and Fuku-chan. But…”

Yoshiko wanted to say that they were making Neeju and the others bear the burden of Seina’s hardships that they themselves should have been handling.

“It’s okay! To make up for the bad luck, even more people are supporting Seina-nii-chan now. They’re all incredibly capable people, and above all, they love Seina-nii-chan. It’s only been a year, but that’s the conclusion I’ve reached after getting to know him. Besides, Yoshiko-chan, you might not believe this, but the top brass at the company has determined that Seina-nii-chan’s bad luck holds significant value, that it’s worth supporting him. Seina-nii-chan himself has gained a surprising amount of experience. So don’t worry, just leave it

to us.” As if to blow away Yoshiko’s gloom, Neeju spoke brightly and emphatically.

It seemed her feelings had come across clearly to Yoshiko.

“Okay... I get it! Please take care of my brother.”

With that, Yoshiko gave Neeju and Fuku a tight hug.

“Oh, how delightful!” Hokuto happily gulped down his beer and then slammed his hand down on Seina's shoulder.

“Man, Seina. Your coworkers are really top-notch, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. They’re almost too good for me.”

“No, we’re still so inexperienced…”

“Not at all. Even my employees were surprised.” Hokuto said quickly to Ringo, who looked down in embarrassment.

“That’s right. And thanks to you guys, Ringo-san, the financial statements, which used to take so long, are going to be finished in no time. That’s really impressive, isn’t it?”

“Yes, exactly! I wish I could show you the faces of those advisors.”

Hokuto must have been incredibly frustrated up until now, as he was smiling more than he'd ever seen him before.

“However, Father, I hate to say this, but it seems the delay in the financial statements was due to deliberate manipulation by your advisors and their accounting department. I suspect the bank also has some ulterior motives.”

“Ulterior motives?”

“They’re likely using this to gather data for opening a large-scale store in this area. Depending on the situation, our store might even be used as the foundation for that…”

“As the foundation?”

“It means they intend to strip the Yamada family of management control during the expansion process.”

“What?!” Hokuto couldn’t hide his shock. It seemed his drunkenness had completely vanished.

“We’re still strictly in the data-gathering phase, so I think things will change depending on the results, but I expect a conclusion will come surprisingly soon.”

“W-what…? Then, what should we do…?”

“Please rest assured. I’ve already issued orders to my subordinates to investigate. We’ll assess the other party’s intentions and do our best to ensure a peaceful resolution, but depending on the situation, we may also need to undermine their parent company or supporting organizations. Things might get a little chaotic. Please bear with us.”

“H-huh...?”

Hokuto and Kyouko were slightly taken aback by Ringo’s confident expression. After all, the situation had escalated far beyond what they had anticipated. It was a heavy burden for a rookie CEO who was already stretched thin just managing the store’s expansion.

“Father… Ringo-sama’s Accounting Department is also known as the ‘Hyena Corps…” Hakuren whispered softly into Hokuto’s ear, trying to reassure him.

“Huh, hyena? What… does that mean…?”

“It means that the moment you make an enemy of her, their defeat is already a foregone conclusion.”

“...T-this is going to be a big deal, isn’t it?”

Watching Ringo’s smile as she pondered something, Seina’s parents realized that the delicate woman standing before them was actually a truly formidable force to be reckoned with. Well, for Ringo, who dealt with matters at the national level, private-sector competition over local supermarkets was no different from a child’s quarrel. That said, even when dealing with children, she showed absolutely no mercy when it came to accounting, which was precisely why she was known as ‘The Demon Princess of Accounting’.

“Now, now. The bottom line is that one headache has been taken care of. Father, Mother.” Amane cheerfully poured beer into Hokuto’s glass. Her cheerfulness was like a miracle cure that blew away any anxiety.

“Y-yeah, you’re right. Ahahahaha!”

Feeling that things had settled down now that the mood had lightened, Seina said, “Well then, I’ll be heading for bed… Oh, right, Mom. I was thinking of going over to Tenchi-senpai’s place first thing tomorrow morning to say hello.” Having said that, he stood up.

“Yes, go ahead. I've seen that you seem to be doing well, and there's nothing for you to do here anyway.”

“Alright then, Seina-chan. Let’s meet up over there and then head to Masaki Village. Auntie, all of us will be going to the Masaki house tomorrow as well.”

“Oh, I see. Seina, please say hello to Tsukiko-san and Kai-kun for me.”

“Okay, I’ll be going then.”

“Good night, Seina-sama.”

Seina left the room, seen off by everyone. The moment Seina's presence faded, Ringo and Kiriko suddenly turned serious, turned to face Hokuto and Kyouko, and stood at attention and bowed. Following their lead, the others joined them.

"W-what's going on? Why are you all suddenly so formal?"

The two were puzzled by Ringo and Kiriko's behavior.

"This is something that should have been decided much sooner. No, even before that, after obtaining proper consent from his parents… We would like to begin by apologizing for having decided this on our own, based solely on our own convenience." Ringo, who held the highest position among them, spoke first.

"An apology? What are you referring to?"

"For assigning Seina-chan to a dangerous mission based on our own convenience. This is my responsibility as Seina-chan's guardian."

"No, Father and Mother. This was not something Kiriko-san could have done anything about. If anyone is to blame, it should be me..."

"Now, now, both of you, please lift your heads. We have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. First, tell us what's happening."

"Yes…" Ringo raised her head and smoothed out her slightly rumpled clothes.

"It all began during Seina-sama's journey to the Academy. Although it didn't make the news, a major criminal bust took place. And it turned out that Seina-sama was involved in all of it."

"Huh? What do you mean??"

"It means that Seina-sama was the catalyst that drew those criminals in."

"Well, sure, that boy has bad luck, but I've never heard anything like that before..." Hokuto looked at Kyouko, seeking her agreement.

"You're right… Things have gotten a bit dangerous around here, but if that were the case, shouldn't there have been more incidents?"

"The vehicle Seina-sama was riding in was actually a transport vehicle for valuables, so the investigation team's theory is that this may have been the trigger that drew them in."

"So, the fact that my son was on board increased the likelihood of them being targeted… If that's the case…"

"That's certainly possible. It's a shame what happened to the people in that transport vehicle. Hearing Ringo-san's story reminded me of them. They seemed like such nice people…"

"At any rate, they arrived safely."

She kept it a secret that they had suffered severe trauma and had been receiving treatment until very recently. On the other hand, ‘That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’.

“That’s a relief. …But I still have some doubts. It’s not about what we were just talking about, but that kid used to ride in his dad’s delivery truck too. But there's no mention of him being attacked by anything.”

“We had flat tires all the time, and it broke down a lot, though. Hahaha.”

“I wonder if that has something to do with the distance traveled… Seina-chan has never been on a long-distance trip, has he?”

“Well, after a few accidents on bus field trips, he was asked to refrain from participating, and by the time the next school trip came around, he was flat-out refused from the start.”

“T-that can’t be...”

Amane and the others, who had been listening in silence, were completely dumbfounded. After all, while it was common to be told to participate in school events, it’s rare to be told not to.

“I-I’m so sorry to hear that…”

“Our company includes a cargo transport division, and since the cargo often contains valuable items, we frequently come under attack from those who target them. Because of that, we sometimes send out decoy transport teams...”

“I see… I think I’m starting to get the picture.” Seina’s parents seemed to catch on immediately.

“And that’s connected to that money, right?”

“Yes. The unit Seina-sama belongs to has been remarkably active, and their number of pirate apprehensions during transport is by far the highest.”

“It was Ringo-sama who lobbied the various companies to offer those bounties. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to raise that much money...”

“If you think of it as the price of Seina-sama’s life, it’s not expensive at all. On the contrary, a life can’t be measured in money, yet we…” Ringo bit her lip with a pained expression.

“To be cherished so deeply by everyone like that… that child is truly lucky…”

“Auntie...”

At Kyouko's words, Kiriko and the others looked up, clinging to her words.

“I'm talking about Kiriko-chan. You were the one who tried to stop him, weren’t you?”

“W-well…”

“But if he said he was going to do it, there was no reason to stop him.”

“Thank you. Hearing you say that puts my mind at ease. …But there’s one more problem. It concerns father, mother, and Yoshiko-san.”

“Us…?”

“Seina-sama’s work also involves making enemies.”

“Ah, I see.”

As if they had anticipated this, Kyouko and Hokuto exchanged glances and nodded.

“Actually, now that the shop has grown, I’ve been told to think about security. We’re scheduled to install security equipment soon, and I’m supposed to take a training course as well.”

“I see.”

“Well, I’ll clean up after my son, I suppose. Though it feels a bit too little, too late.”

If Seina came back, it would bring another ticking time bomb, and if he was going to hold a grudge, he probably already did.

“It’s just Yoshiko, though… But I get the feeling you have a plan for that, too?”

There was no way Ringo and the others would say something to make them anxious for no reason.

“Of course. Seina-sama's family... no, across this entire region, the strongest security detail we could possibly imagine has already established a surveillance network. We are monitoring your family, friends, and everyone else individually, so please rest assured.”

After all, the ‘strongest guards’ were none other than Washu and the members of the Masaki family. With their scientific and military capabilities, there was absolutely no one who could harm the Yamada family. Moreover, the high-density nano-machine surveillance network extended throughout the entire solar system.

“You’ve really thought of everything… Thank you.”

“Not at all! This is the least we can do to repay Seina-sama.”

“That’s more than enough! Well, let’s leave the serious talk at that for now.”

“That's right. So, from here on out, it's adult time...” Hokuto said, then looked meaningfully around at the women. Then he exchanged a glance with Kyouko.

“We’re going to hold a big Q&A session revealing all sorts of things about Seina that we couldn’t ask if he were here!”

“Whoo-hoo!”

Kyouko's announcement was met with cheers from the women. Between the contrast to the serious conversation and the alcohol, everyone was in an unusually high-spirited mood. However, Kiriko, the one being questioned, had a slightly troubled expression on her face.

"Alright, alright. I'm prepared for this, so ask me anything." Kiriko said, half in a fit of desperation, as she met the stares directed at her.

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"Whoa!"

Seina couldn't help but gasp when he saw the bathtub in the new house. But unlucky Seina couldn't simply enjoy the large tub. Above all, the bathtub was a hotbed of danger. First, he had to check for hazardous spots before getting in and fully visualize the layout of the items to avoid careless actions.

"Oh… but they actually put a lot of thought into this."

The bath was designed to avoid dangers that were usually easy to overlook.

"Well, certainly, there have been a lot of things that have happened in the bath... so there's plenty of data to be found."

Seina enjoyed the new bath with a wry smile.

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"Huh... so this is it."

In the living room, the women were gathered in a tight cluster around one corner of the table. What they were intently looking at were several old photo albums labeled 'Seina's Records'.

"So cute." Gyokuren murmured dreamily as she looked at the photos of Seina pasted in the album.

Everyone got goosebumps from her relentlessly alluring charm.

"Stop giving off that weird vibe!"

"W-well, he is cute, but… no matter which picture you look at, he seems to be injured somewhere."

"Yeah, he's cute."

“That's why I told you to stop!”

“It’s no use. It seems pointless to say anything to Gyokuren right now. Let’s just give her an album and have her sit over there.”

“Well, how about this one?”

“Thank you.”

Karen handed Gyokuren the unsorted photos Kyouko had given her, then moved her to a corner of the room for the time being.

“She’s… she’s really something, isn’t she?”

“Father, are you all right?”

“Huh? Oh, I’m fine.” Hokuto said in a panic, continuing the conversation as if to cover up a physiological issue, mostly of a lower nature.

“Well, he was always the type of kid who had some kind of injury or another all year round. Right, Auntie?”

“That’s true. But it’s a common thing for boys. Besides, as long as he didn’t need to go to the hospital, I didn’t even count it as an injury.”

“Still, he’s got injuries all over the place, doesn’t he?”

“That’s right. So I used to take a commemorative photo whenever he got hurt.”

“Auntie... you really did find it amusing, didn't you?”

“This one was when he fell into a manhole, and this one was when he slipped off the pedals of his tricycle.”

“That was the very day he got those hand-me-down clothes, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right. Kiriko-chan carried Seina on her back all the way home...”

“Falling into rivers, falling into rice paddies, getting stuck in ditches, falling off his bike, and even twisting an ankle just from tripping over nothing while walking... It was quite a struggle.”

“So that’s how he got this injury?”

They were utterly flabbergasted.

“To begin with, on the very day he was born, every single nurse at the maternity ward came down with a cold or stomachache, so he was delivered by a midwife who was nearly eighty. And right after he was born, there was an earthquake, which is rare around here, and the midwife strained her back… Then, when we went to the shrine for the first shrine visit to ward off bad luck, a sudden downpour hit, and lightning struck the shrine. And there were

several mistakes when registering his birth at the town hall, too."

"...You certainly have no shortage of stories."

"Well, I can laugh about it now, of course."

"...Oh!" Ryoko cried out.

"Hm? What?"

"I feel a strange sense of dissonance… but in all of Seina-kun's photos, even when he looks like he's got some pretty bad injuries, he's always smiling."

"Huh? But don't people usually smile when they're having their picture taken?"

"Amane-san… take a closer look! Even when he clearly looks pale and doesn't seem to have the energy for it at all, he's still smiling."

"Ugh... yeah, you're right..."

It wasn't until then that she finally noticed something was wrong with Seina. Kyouko's tone was so matter-of-fact that Amane had inadvertently overlooked it as well.

"That's right. He kept getting injured so often that I even wondered if there was something wrong with his brain and he just couldn't feel anything."

"I even worried, 'Could this kid be a masochist?' Hahaha!"

It was a laughing matter now, but for Seina's parents, those were heavy words. Behind this laughter lie a great deal of suffering.

"Ever since he was little, Seina-chan was terribly afraid of causing anyone pain because of him. He often ruined the atmosphere with his actions..."

"That's right. Whenever we laughed, he looked so relieved."

"Such a young child… no, to have been burdened with such misfortune from the moment he was born… poor thing."

At Ringo's words, everyone fell silent.

"So, maybe he met Kiriko around this time?" Amane said as she pointed to a certain photo.

"Huh? Oh, yes, you noticed that, did you?"

"His energy's totally different, after all."

It was a photo of Seina and Kai, both laughing with bandages wrapped around their heads, arms, and everywhere else.

"By the way, is that Kiriko's younger brother? He's laughing right next to Seina. That's pretty

amazing in its own right."

"...Well, that's kind of Kai's redeeming quality."

"Hmm. He really does seem like a real show-off. I can kind of see why Kiriko gets annoyed."

"Yeah, that's exactly it." Kiriko said rudely as she put her hand to her cheek. Her tone was so cold that it sent chills down everyone's spine.

"You should at least try to deny it a little." Amane felt sorry for Kai because of how dismissive she was.

"Hehe, Kiriko-san is adorable too. I see her caring nature has been there since she was this young." Pointing to a photo of young Kiriko and Seina, Ryoko smiled.

If anything, they looked more like siblings in that picture.

"It's just like the two of them are now."

"I thought her obsession with Seina was off the charts, but I guess it's only natural after all this time."

"That's… not true."

"I'm grateful to Kiriko-chan. People used to say that Seina had a scary guard dog... and they even said it was a military dog like a Doberman or a German Shepherd, or even Cerberus, right?"

"...W-well, I've never heard that myself."

"Ahahahaha~~! Well, they couldn't possibly say that to your face. So, what's a Cerberus? I can kind of picture it, but..."

"I don't know!" Kiriko turned away, looking sulky.

"Oh, never mind."

Kiriko's reaction was practically proof that her guess was right. Amane grinned, but decided against pressing her further, realizing it might backfire.

"But if that's the case, it naturally means Seina-sama didn't have a girlfriend, right?"

"Apparently, all he ever heard was 'Don't come near me' or 'Stay away,' so… well, it was impossible, wasn't it?"

"Oh, that's right, he said that when we sent Neeju-sama off."

"That's another story…"

Hakuren and the others gazed at Seina's photo with sympathetic expressions.

“Well, with that much bad luck, it can’t be helped.”

“Hmm… So that means this was Seina’s first kiss!?” Amane crossed her arms and said something outrageous.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?!”

True to her name, Cerberus, Kiriko lunged at Amane with a ferocious expression. But Amane, used to this, didn’t seem particularly bothered, and said nonchalantly, “Hm? Well, remember when I first met Seina? I accidentally knocked him into the pond in front of Tenchi-kun’s house with a shockwave… and then I had to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. You know, mouth-to-mouth.”

“Damn!”

“Amane-san. I don’t think that counts, does it? It was just a medical procedure… Besides, Kiriko-san, you’re the one who needs to confess.”

“Wha—why me!?”

“You must be Seina-sama’s watchdog, right? Kiriko-san is the most likely candidate, after all.”

“Ah, I see.”

Everyone turned toward Kiriko all at once. The sense of intimidation was extraordinary. On top of the interest from the many women present, Kyouko’s presence only amplified the pressure. After all, the issue of Seina’s potential girlfriend, something he had long given up on, was at stake. Her desperation was unlike anything the others felt.

“I once kissed him on the cheek… but that was when I was a kid!” Under that pressure, Kiriko couldn’t help but blurt out the truth.

“If that’s the case, then he’s still… Oh!”

At that moment, a flashback of the surveillance footage from Jurai played in Hakuren and the others’ minds.

“……”

“Do you have any idea what that means?”

Ignoring Amane and Ryoko, who were staring at them in puzzlement, those who had likely seen the footage fell silent. Yes, it was a scene of Kuisu Panta, transformed into Tsukiko, passionately kissing Seina.

(Let’s just forget about it. It’s best that way. Just think of it as being bitten by a wild beast…) Everyone who knew about it assumed that would happen.

“This feels off. Are you hiding something?”

“No, I was just thinking about all the people who might be capable of that. There are plenty of people on Jurai who seem like they’d do something like that.”

“In that sense, the Academy is also like that, isn't it?”

“Hmm… If that’s the case, maybe it’s me?” Kyouko muttered amid the silence as the women pondered.

“Auntie?”

“When that child was born. He was my first child, and I was so happy.”

“...I see. Well then, it’s decided—Auntie is the one who had Seina’s first kiss!”

Given the flow of the conversation, settling on that was the best option, and dragging it out any further would be pointless. Besides, if the person in question was Kyouko, no one would have any complaints.

“Naturally, since the kiss was like that, there’s no need to worry about what happens next.”

“I once said I’d be his partner if it was for a Personal Development project.” This time, Ryoko dropped a new bombshell.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?” And just like the earlier debate about first kisses, Kiriko snapped at Ryoko with a fierce expression.

Ryoko nonchalantly replied, “First of all, training is necessary. Oh, of course, I haven't done it yet.” She brushed Kiriko off with ease.

“Ryoko... Don't scare me like that, seriously...”

But there was no respite for Kiriko. Amane dropped another bombshell.

“Whoa, I spotted Kiriko’s mom! She definitely looks like a regular mom these days.”

“Of course! Is my mom a pervert or something?!”

“So, I wonder when she started noticing it?”

“Let’s take a look.”

Everyone, including Ringo, started flipping through the album all at once, full of curiosity.

“Hey! Stop it!”

“...Here.”

Gyokuren, who had been happily looking at Seina’s photos all by herself, suddenly pulled one out of the stack and held it out to Amane.

“Huh!? Let me see!”

With flawless teamwork Amane lunged for the photo as the others subdued Kiriko. Upon seeing it, Amane nodded in understanding.

“Isn’t this from when Kiriko went into space?”

“What!?”

It was a group photo taken back when Kiriko went to space. Or rather, when she told Seina and his family that she was moving to Tokyo for a job. Kiriko looked somehow radiant and relieved, Seina looked a little lonely, and Tsukiko was smiling.

“……Ugh!”

For Kiriko, it was a glimpse of her past self that made her want to look away.

“But I don't think it's that strange?”

“Leaving Kai-kun aside, it’s the way the three of them are standing. Look, Kiriko is standing apart from Seina and, and Kiriko’s mom is…”

“Ah!”

Kiriko couldn’t help but gasp. Tsukiko was pressed right up against Seina, as if she were clinging to him. If you were to isolate just Seina and Tsukiko...

“It’s pretty subtle, but… I can’t quite tell yet if she’s conscious of Seina, can you?”

“Oh, if you ask me, those are definitely the eyes of a woman in love.” Gyokuren’s eye for these things is practically psychic. If she said so, it must be true.

“Oh, you look like you know exactly what I’m talking about, Kiriko-sama.”

“A while back… when I opposed Seina-chan joining the GP, someone brought up a hypothetical scenario about what would happen if Seina-chan came back here.”

“Hey, what have you been talking about all this time, Kiriko-chan?” Kyouko, who had finally lost track of the conversation, tilted her head in confusion.

“Aaaah, I’m so sorry! We completely got carried away talking among ourselves.”

“Since this is a welcome party for you girls, I don't mind at all... but I'd appreciate it if you could talk in a way that we can understand, too.”

“We were just talking about Kiriko’s mom… wondering what kind of future Seina might have had if he’d stayed here.”

“That girl, huh... Tsukiko-san did actually mention once that if he graduated from middle or high school, he should come to Masaki Village.”

“I see, I see.”

Amane, sensing an interesting story, nodded. Of course, Gyokuren was also staring intently at Kyouko. In any case, these two had sharp instincts, albeit for completely different reasons.

“He’ll reach the age where he has to get a job someday, but if he were here, customers wouldn’t come, so I can’t have him work here, and it’s even less likely that anyone else would hire him. So if he stays in Masaki Village, our business will run smoothly, and that would lead to financial stability for him, too.”

“As a result, your family’s shop grew to be that big, didn’t it?”

“I feel bad about passing the burden on to them, but when Tsukiko-san told me she’d feel lonely if Kai-kun left home after Kiriko-chan, I had no reason to refuse.”

“I see, so that’s it!” Seeing where the conversation was headed, Amane suddenly exclaimed.

Of course, Gyokuren was smiling too.

“That gave me a start... What are you talking about?”

“Huh? Oh, Kiriko’s mom…!!”

“You idiot! This is Earth!”

“Oh, right.”

“In other words, a woman is a woman no matter how old she is.” Gyokuren, who had been staring intently at the photo until then, said meaningfully.

“Huh?” Naturally, Kyouko looked puzzled.

Seeing this, Gyokuren continued. “So, you’re saying there’s a chance Seina-sama and Kiriko-sama’s mother might end up living together, right?”

“Oh, yeah... Wait!! Is that what you mean by 'a woman is a woman no matter how old she is'?”

“Heh. She’s still quite beautiful, after all.”

“Auntie, that was just Gyokuren joking…”

As if determined not to let Gyokuren say another word, Kiriko stepped between Gyokuren and Kyouko. But by then, it was already too late.

“Come to think of it, she once said, ‘I could still have a couple more kids.’ Did she mean Seina when she said that?”

“What!? Oh, but Auntie, that's not related to Seina-chan at all...”

“Well, that wouldn’t be so bad, would it?”

“A-Auntie!?”

“If Tsukiko-san is okay with it, then we have no objections. Of course... if there are other unusual people like that, they're more than welcome.”

“Wow!”

A murmur of surprise arose from the women.

(Hmmmm. It's so noisy... I don't have the courage to go in there.) Feeling left out, Hokuto still felt more relief than loneliness, and enjoyed drinking alone, using Kiriko and the others' boisterousness as his entertainment.

“So, does anyone else have any questions?”

“Ah! Well then…”

“Auntie… shouldn’t we stop now?” Kiriko stopped Amane just as she was about to raise her hand.

“What are you talking about? We’re just getting started!”

“Auntieeeee~~~”

Ignoring Kiriko’s anguished cry, Amane and the others continued to have a great time until well past midnight, using the photos of Kiriko and Seina as their source of amusement.

Now, it goes without saying that Seina’s parents, inspired by Gyokuren that night, shared a moment of intimacy, their first in quite some time.

Chapter Eight: To the Masaki Residence

“...Myaa, myaa”

In the early morning, while it was still dimly lit, Fuku was meowing softly and sadly by Seina's pillow. Neeju and Yoshiko, and everyone else in the house, were asleep, exhausted from the previous day. Amane and the others had only been asleep for about three hours. Fuku was the only one awake in the silent house, and had come to her master, Seina, to fill the void of her loneliness.

“Mii, mii.”

But Fuku was smart. She knew it was wrong to make a loud noise, so she was meowing softly.

“Mii, mii… myau!?”

Just then, a gentle breeze blew in through the window, and it made the yarn pom-pom at the end of the string Seina had tied so he could turn off the fluorescent light while lying in bed sway just right.

“.....Mya!”

Fuku, who had been staring intently at the pom-pom, couldn’t resist the sweet temptation of her feline instincts and pounced on it.

Thud! Clang!! Fuku’s slight weight on the pom-pom caused the fluorescent light fixture hanging from the ceiling to fall right onto Seina’s face.

“Fumya! ...Myuu?” Fuku meowed awkwardly

“...Good morning, Fuku,” Seina said gently.

Seina quietly went downstairs and peeked into the living room. There was not a trace of the commotion from the previous night. No matter how late it was, no matter how drunk they were, the housekeeping experts had cleaned everything up nicely.

Next, Seina headed to the kitchen, where he found what looked like a bento box and a simple note.

“She made breakfast for me. That's Kiriko-san for you.”

The note explained that this was breakfast for Seina and Fuku, as well as Neeju and Yoshiko, the group who had left the party early, and apologized for serving leftovers from the night before.

“I'm hungry. Shall we eat first?”

“Mya!”

Seina took a bottle of barley tea from the refrigerator, filled a glass to the brim, and began eating breakfast with Fuku.

“There were so many different kinds of food at last night’s party. Since there’s still a lot we haven’t eaten yet, it doesn’t really feel like leftovers, does it?”

The variety of side dishes, almost like a mini-buffet, was fun to look at and made him feel excited.

“Come to think of it, she said she wanted to hear my thoughts, but I can’t remember which dish was which at all… Oh, right, having NB around would be handy at times like this.”

Seina glanced at Fuku, who was eating with incredible gusto.

“...Well, either way, I couldn’t bring him here. Fuku, is it good?”

“Myaa!”

“I see, I see. Since Kiriko-san and Karen made it, everything’s really delicious, isn’t it?” Seina murmured as he stroked Fuku.

“Once we’re done eating, let’s head straight over to Tenchi-senpai’s. What about you, Fuku? Do you want to come with everyone later? Or do you want to come with me?”

“Myaa, myaa!” Fuku clung to Seina's hand, as if to say she didn't want to be left behind.

“All right, then let’s go together.”

“Myaa!” With that, Fuku resumed eating, looking relieved.

After finishing their meal, Seina placed their dishes in the sink, filled it with water, left a note saying they were heading to the Masaki house, and went outside.

“Looks like it’s going to be another nice day. Come to think of it, my bike…”

Seina headed to the storage shed in the back and was reunited with his beloved ‘Kai Special’.

“Whoa, it’s been a while… Wait, it’s been modified in all sorts of ways?? Kai must have been coming by from time to time and tinkering with it.”

Still, grateful for the work that had been done, Seina straddled the Kai Special, then, placing Fuku in the front basket, “Alright, let’s go!”

“Myaa!”

It had been a while since he'd pedaled the Kai Special.

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It climbed the mountain pass with ease, much like a large motorcycle.

“Whoa, this is amazing! So this is what Bio-Enhancement is all about!” Seina shouted excitedly as he looked down at the hill he had just climbed.

Because he could compare it to the past, he could truly appreciate how amazing it was.

“Before, I could barely make it up here in the lowest gear without walking my bike… But to be able to climb this easily in the highest gear…”

“Mya! Mya!”

Fuku was excitedly sitting in the front basket, looking very happy. Seina stroked her to calm her down and then looked across the road.

“Look, that’s Tenchi-senpai’s house over there. We couldn’t meet him yesterday, but today we’ll get to see both Tenchi-senpai and Fuku’s big sister, Ryo-Ohki-chan.”

“Myaaa!! Myaa! Myaa!”

“Good girl! Let’s hurry over there.”

Seina pressed down hard on the pedals.

“Hah! Hahahaha!”

Partly because it was a downhill slope, but even with just a light push, the bike accelerated like a car or motorcycle, sending Seina’s excitement soaring. Thanks to his lightning-fast reflexes, he was confident he could control it no matter how fast he went. On Earth, Seina was undoubtedly a superhuman who far surpassed even top athletes.

“I’m different… I see. So this is what it means to be unable to return to Earth. I’m an alien now, ahahahaha~~!”

Seina felt conflicted, but he decided to just let himself enjoy the thrill for now. Just then, a sharp curve appeared right in front of him. Even a curve that would normally be impossible to make, Seina could handle with ease.

(Alright!)

He slammed on the brakes at the last second to slow down.

But, crunch! The brake lever he was gripping crumpled, and the cable snapped.

(Huh!?)

Seina had become superhuman thanks to Bio-Enhancement, but the strength of his bike remained the same.

“Aaaaaaaa!!”

“Myaaaaaa!!”

Seina and Fuku instinctively kicked the guardrail with their feet to avoid a direct hit, but carried by the momentum, they flew through the air, screaming, and landed in a field about fifty meters away.

(…Ahhh… I let my guard down.)

Because he had shielded Fuku and the bicycle, his landing was a bit rough, but fortunately, the ground below was soft, freshly tilled soil, so Seina wasn’t injured. It was also the moment he felt most grateful for the benefits of Bio-Enhancement.

“...Are you okay?”

Just then, along with the sound of footsteps rushing toward them, he heard a familiar voice he would never forget.

“Tenchi-senpai!”

Pulling his head out of the ground and looking up, Seina saw Masaki Tenchi gazing at him with a warm, familiar smile. And standing beside him, the adorable Ryo-Ohki was looking at Seina with a slightly startled expression.

“Myaa!” Fuku let out a cry at the sight of Ryo-Ohki.

They had met before as ship bodies, but this was their first encounter as brain bodies. Besides, Ryo-Ohki had quickly left back then, so they’d had almost no time to savor the afterglow of their meeting.

“Myaa! Myaa!” With tears welling up in her eyes, Fuku ran toward Ryo-Ohki, her steps still a bit unsteady.

“Myaa!” Ryo-Ohki welcomed Fuku with the composed expression and mannerisms of an older sister, then gave her a firm hug.

“That's great, Fuku.”

Seeing this adorable scene, Seina and Tenchi exchanged glances and smiled.

“Oh, good morning. You should have slept a little longer.” Kyouko said as she swept the garden, giving a wry smile at the slightly glum faces of the beautiful women lined up on the veranda.

Ringo, of course, was the only one with a composed expression, but anyone who knew her could tell from her demeanor that she’d really let loose the night before.

“Thanks to you, last night was a blast.”

“You seem to be in good spirits, Auntie. …I think.”

She drank and ate just as much as Kiriko and the others, and on top of that... But it would be rude to say anything more than that.

“Speaking of which, where’s Seina-chan?”

“Oh, good morning, Kiriko-onee-san! Onii-san left a note saying he was going to Tenchi-san’s place.” Yoshiko said as she and Neeju came running from the kitchen when they heard Kiriko’s voice.

“He took Fuku-chan with him. We looked everywhere for her.” Yoshiko puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“Fuku-chan’s older sister is over there, so I guess she wanted to see her right away.”

“I see… Well, I guess there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Neeju-sama, if you’ve finished breakfast, we should head over to the Masaki house soon…”

“There’s no need to rush. We can go after we’ve had breakfast, can’t we?”

“Ah, well…”

After all, it’s been less than five hours since the party ended. Most of the girls had heartburn and a hangover.

“Then how about we have a cup of tea and take a breather? My husband should be up by then, so he can take you there in the company minibus.” Kyouko said with a laugh when she saw Kiriko and the other girls’ condition.

“If he could just drive Neeju-sama there, we don’t mind walking…”

“That would just turn into a festive procession. After what happened yesterday, it’s already become quite the talk of the town. The shop’s been getting tons of inquiries, too. Well, the shop welcomes it as free publicity, but it’s a hassle to have people following you around elsewhere, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry. In that case, thank you for your help.”

In this condition, Kiriko didn’t have the confidence to handle a commotion like yesterdays calmly. She felt like she was going to unleash Cerberus Kiriko's true power... no, her instincts in full force.

“Is Neeju-chan going too? Ugh, that’s no fun.”

“I'll be coming back today. But I'm not really sure about Fuku-chan... She might stay with Seina-onii-chan, or she might stay at her older sister's place...”

“It’s fine as long as Neeju-chan comes back.” Yoshiko’s sad expression vanished in an instant, replaced by a bright smile.

“Well then, I’ll make some tea. We might even be able to have a light breakfast in a little while.” Kyouko said as she leaned the broom against the wall of the house and stepped up from the veranda.

In the Masaki family’s field, Tenchi and Seina were filling in the holes in the ground and leveling the soil. Ryo-Ohki and Fuku watched them intently.

“Sorry for making you help out.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry for digging a huge hole in your field… But it’s been a really long time, Tenchi-senpai.”

“I’m just glad to see you’re doing well. I was really surprised when Airi-san told me you’d gone to the GP Academy. After all, taking a pure-blooded Earthling like you into space is strictly forbidden, and above all, I have absolutely no idea how that even happened.”

“I was surprised when I woke up, too. Well, I was surprised all over again when I got to the Academy and saw Kiriko-san there.”

“You weren’t surprised by the pirates along the way?”

“...Well, I was pretty surprised, but the panic among Onnainin-san and the crew around me was so intense that I felt kind of sorry for them.”

When everyone around you is in a panic, it actually makes you stay calm. Seina, who was used to trouble, knew from experience that losing your cool in situations like that was dangerous.

“And there was this incredibly laid-back person...”

“Well, that’s just like you, Seina-kun.” Tenchi said with a wry smile.

No matter where he went or what happened, Seina was always his natural self.

“Speaking of which, is the GP chairman really your grandmother?”

“That’s right.”

“Is that so…? Well, I’m used to it now, but it was strange at first. I mean, she’s so young, yet she’s actually a real grandmother.”

“She gets mad if you call her ‘Grandma,’ though. Dealing with Airi-san must be pretty tough, right?”

“W-well… I haven’t quite gotten used to that part yet… but there’s always someone higher up.”

“I see. Did you get to meet Seto-sama, too?”

“I met Emperor Jurai and the Empresses, Minaho-sama, Kanemitsu-sama… so many people… Ah! That’s right! Tenchi-senpai’s older sister! I met Tennyo-san, too. At first, I thought she was Aunt Kiyone… I thought she was still alive…”

Seina seemed to recall the emotions he felt at that moment, and he was at a loss for words.

“...Um... so, I ended up crying a little.”

“Haha, actually, so did I.” Tenchi smiled shyly.

“Huh? Oh, come to think of it, I think she mentioned something about it being the same pattern as Tenchi-senpai…”

“That’s not right, is it? Showing up dressed exactly like Mom. I guess it’s because they look so much alike that she thought about switching places with her… But to think that was just a setup to surprise me in the future…”

“But there were other, legitimate reasons too…”

“That’s true. But between Airi-san and Mom, the women in my family…”

“They’re really full of energy, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they are.”

The two looked at each other and laughed weakly. Just then, Ryo-Ohki, perhaps wanting to join their conversation, tugged at the hem of Seina’s shirt while still carrying Fuku on her head.

“Myaa, myaa!”

“Ryo-Ohki-chan, thanks for saving me the other day.”

“Myaa!”

It was just a brief exchange, but perhaps satisfied with that, Ryo-Ohki ran off toward the rice paddy.

“But getting back to the topic…”

Tenchi leaned his hoe against the raised section of the ridge and sat down beside it. He motioned for Seina to sit as well. Seina gave a small nod and sat down next to him.

“I heard that the GP pamphlet was what got you interested in going to space, but how did you manage to get your hands on something like that, Seina-kun?”

“My bike got a flat tire in front of your house, so I was trying to scoop water from the pond to check for a hole in the inner tube. Then, all of a sudden, there was this massive shockwave and I lost consciousness…”

“Ugh… the same pattern as Mihoshi-san. I didn’t think Amane-san was the careless type… Or is it just common sense to have some kind of guidance device after all?”

“So Amane-san, who took care of me, thought I was connected to Tenchi-senpai and gave me a GP pamphlet as if she were recruiting me. Well, when I took it home and looked at it, my mom filled it out as a prank…”

“And before you knew it, you was in space...”

“That’s exactly it.”

“Huh... Originally, there was a separate gate for cargo and people coming from space. But since the gate Washu-san built is so discreet and can handle large shipments, they’ve started using that pond recently...”

“So if that hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have gone to space... It’s strange when you think about it. But for me, it was good luck.”

“You don’t regret it? You’re being chased by a huge number of pirates, and the danger to

your life is significantly higher...”

“Kiriko-san said the same thing to me when I first met her at the Academy. But I don’t regret it.”

“...Yeah. Well, if that’s the case, then it’s fine.” Tenchi nodded, looking relieved. No matter how many times he’d heard it from others, he wanted to hear Seina’s resolve directly.

“Come to think of it, Tenchi-senpai, when did you find out you were someone connected to space? I heard you’re usually told when you come of age, but you’re not that old yet, are you?”

“My case was a bit of an exception. Well, how should I put it…? Starting with Ryoko, everyone just sort of gathered around me one after another, leading up to where we are now… I guess? It’s a long story, but I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“...I don’t really get it, but... you’ve had your share of struggles too, haven’t you?”

“No, no, not as much as you.” Suddenly, a voice whispered in Seina’s ear.

He jerked his head to the side and found Washu’s face right next to him. He hadn’t even noticed when Washu had appeared.

“Huh!? Wait, what!? Waaaaaah??”

“Hello, it’s Washu-chan~” Washu was thoroughly delighted by Seina’s startled reaction.

“Myamyamyamyaaaaaa~~!!”

“Whaaah!”

However, Seina’s revenge was taken by Fuku, who was overjoyed at being reunited with her mother. Washu took the full brunt of Fuku’s charge right in the face, landing flat on her butt. Then, Ryo-Ohki followed right behind and straddled her, delivering the final blow.

“Ugh... I'm done for.”

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“Myan. Myan. Myaa!”

“Hmm, hmm… I see, I see.”

Washu stared intently at the gem on Fuku’s forehead, engaging in an exchange that could be interpreted as either a conversation or simply nodding along. They were clearly communicating in some way, but Seina couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“Hmm! That’s quite an interesting way to grow. Truly fascinating.”

“Is that really okay? We’ve made plenty of mistakes on our end, and we might have warped Fuku’s development. She’s also a bit emotionally unstable, one moment she’s getting along

well with my NB, and the next she's suddenly fighting with him…"

"In terms of her development, she's quite lopsided. But that's a necessary imbalance for her master, Seina-dono. After all, the 'ideal' we imagine is nothing more than an average."

"Hmm... Is it biased?"

"Her growth rate is abnormally fast, so it's bound to be biased. Thanks to Seina-dono, she's gained an absurd amount of experience, so naturally, it affects her emotionally. But her mind is perfectly sound. After all, I used an Astral Core that was more than sufficient for her."

"Astral Core?"

"To put it simply, I guess that's what a soul is?"

"Wait, a soul? Are you saying you used someone soul?" Seina suddenly felt uneasy. He remembered Fuku's cold gaze from when they rescued the shipwrecked boy.

"I can't say whose it is just yet, but that person strongly wished to be with you, Seina-dono… I granted that wish."

"Together with me? But who exactly...?"

"It was enough to wear me out spiritually, so she's not going to break that easily."

"……"

Although he had various concerns, the fact that someone's astral was used to build his ship was quite a shock.

As if sensing Seina's feelings, Washu continued. "There's no need to worry about it. That person didn't sacrifice themselves for Seina-dono's sake. They were simply facing imminent death, and chose to spend their final moments with Seina-dono. Well, they don't have their original memories or personality, but you should think of Fuku as that person's reincarnation and treat her with care."

"……Yes. But there's something that's been bothering me a bit. You see, there was a little incident on the way here, and Fuku's eyes, when she saw what was happening at the time…"

"Her eyes?"

"She was shockingly cold, I guess… Her whole demeanor changed so much, it was as if her personality had been swapped with someone else's…" Just recalling those eyes makes him shiver. That's how intense an impression they left.

"Well, I suppose that could be the case. I know about that incident from the reports, but I guess she was just trying to protect Seina-dono. She was probably looking at that boy that way because he was your enemy."

“Because he was my enemy?”

“I told you, didn't I? It was enough to wear me out. At least you don't have to worry about her directing that gaze at you or the people around you. I'll tell you when the time comes.”

“Understood.”

“But since she doesn’t have any memories from before, it won’t really have much of an effect. More importantly, she’s still just a baby, so she’ll make little mistakes. If anything, that might be the bigger problem.”

“Mistakes…?”

“Like getting so absorbed in something that she neglects everything else. Ryo-Ohki does that from time to time, too. But, heh heh! That’s what makes her so cute, though.”

“Y-yeah… Hahaha.”

It seemed a bit odd for a computer to make a slip-up, but she was a legendary philosopher. Assuming there must be some meaning to it, he just went along with the laughter for the time being.

“Myau... Myuu, myau.”

“Myanmyan.”

“Oh my, Ryo-Ohki too?” Washu watched Ryo-Ohki, who was playing around just as much as Fuku, with a fond smile.

(Well, I suppose it’s fine.) Seina concluded as he watched Washu and Fuku.

Fuku had helped Seina and the others before, and while there had been some issues, those were caused by Seina’s side. So, things could stay this way.

“Oh, but is there a reason why Fuku is an animal and Ryo-Ohki-chan is human-shaped?”

“Hm? What, have you only ever seen her in human form?”

“……?”

Right in front of Ryo-Ohki, Washu clapped her hands sharply, like a stage magician.

“Myan!”

Startled, Ryo-Ohki transformed into a Cabbit and rolled down the slope of the field with great force.

“Myaa!”

Perhaps finding Ryo-Ohki’s tumbling amusing, Fuku ran after her.

“...She transformed!? ...I see, that's the one Sasami-chan used to bring along...”

Watching Ryo-Ohki roll away, Seina realized what was happening and turned toward Washu.

Just then, “Myamyamya!”

Ryo-Ohki came charging back at full speed and, for some reason, lunged straight at Seina.

“A-are you mad at me? Why? …Wait, ouch!”

Ryo-Ohki used Seina as a wall, kicking off him as a feint, and then tackled Washu.

“What!? Uwaaah!”

Washu, hit by a body slam with more force than she expected, fell dramatically backward, and Ryo-Ohki began tickling Washu’s sensitive spots. Fuku joined the fray a moment later. Just like Ryo-Ohki, she used Seina as a stepping stool to climb onto Washu, and together they began tickling her all over, without holding back.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

“Myaa, myaa, myau!”

“Ah, sorry, sorry! I'm really sorry! Spare me there, spare me~~~”

As if she knew her ticklish spots, Ryo-Ohki’s attacks seemed to be hitting Washu right where it hurt. Washu writhed around and begged.

“Ryo-Ohki, just one round is fine. Fuku-chan too.”

“Myauun!”

At Tenchi’s word, Ryo-Ohki instantly stopped tickling her and jumped off with Fuku to the basket holding the harvested carrots.

“So Fuku has learned the tickle attack...”

“You'd better be careful. That's a powerful technique if it hits the right spot.” Washu said as

she sat up, gasping for breath.

“Hmm… I’d really rather not be woken up by that in the morning… But if Ryo-Ohki-chan can take human form, does that mean Fuku can too?”

“She has that ability. It just depends on how you raise her, though.”

“Huh... How I raise her, you say?”

He had no experience raising children. Or rather, given how unlucky Seina was, it was doubtful that he’d be able to raise her properly.

“Just raise her normally. If she feels she needs it, she’ll change. Take it easy.”

“Right, I'll do my best.”

“Heh. Though if you go about it the wrong way, she’ll end up just like my other daughter, so be careful.”

“Pfft!” When Tenchi realized the meaning of Washu's words, he almost burst out laughing.

“Huh? Your other daughter?”

“Seina-kun and Fuku-chan will be fine.” Tenchi said to a worried-looking Seina, holding back his laughter.

“...Uh, well. I don't get that feeling at all.”

Even when said with a laugh, it didn’t sound very convincing. Just as he was about to say that, he spotted a figure approaching from the direction of Masaki’s house.

“Tenchi-nii-chaaan!”

It was Sasami, waving a large basket. Even though they were on a mountain path, she showed off her incredible stamina and was by their side in the blink of an eye.

“Oh! Seina-nii-chan came too. So Fuku-chan is here with you, right?”

Even though she’d run quite a distance at a considerable speed, Sasami wasn’t out of breath at all.

“Yes. Right now...” Tenchi looked over at Ryo-Ohki, who was eating a carrot from the basket.

“Oh, so you got to meet Ryo-chan, Fuku-chan.”

“Myaa!”

Having finished the carrot, Ryo-Ohki ran over to Sasami alongside Fuku.

“Hehe, how cute. …But seeing them side by side like this, you can really tell how much Ryo-

chan has grown, can't you?"

"Fuku's about the same size as when Ryo-Ohki was born, so I guess that's true."

"I brought some morning snacks. There's plenty, so let's all eat together."

Sasami sat on the low stone wall, using it as a chair, and opened a large basket. Ryo-Ohki and Fuku immediately ran up the wall, placed their paws on the edge of the basket, and peered inside.

"Hehe, these are carrot sandwiches made by Sasami."

As Sasami took the sandwiches out of the basket, Ryo-Ohki and Fuku leaned in with sparkling eyes. The aroma made them both look utterly enchanted.

"Go ahead and eat, Ryo-chan, Fuku-chan."

At Sasami's words, the two gladly bit into the sandwiches.

"Hehehe. Is it good?"

"Myau, myau~~n"

Ryo-Ohki and Fuku were devouring the carrot sandwiches with blissful expressions. Seeing how delicious they looked, Tenchi and Seina couldn't help but peek into the basket.

"Help yourselves, everyone. We've got milk and tea, too."

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"That's right! Sasami-chan, things were so hectic yesterday I forgot to mention it, but I met Mahma-san on Jurai. She was really worried about you and asked me to tell her how you're doing."

"Yeah, I know." With that, Sasami stood up abruptly and bowed deeply to Seina. "Seina-nii-chan, thank you so much."

"W-what's wrong, Sasami-chan?"

Seina was taken aback by Sasami's formal and sincere demeanor. But for Sasami, Mahma's situation was something Sasami, as Sasami Masaki Jurai, should be grateful to Seina for.

"Mahma went through a lot of pain because of me. Yet she's still so worried about me, she's a truly kind person."

"...Yeah. That's the impression I got when I met her. She's an incredibly devoted person."

"That's why she's so worried about me. She can't help but worry if I'm pushing myself too hard… But since we can't meet face-to-face, she seems to have a hard time accepting what other people say…"

“It can’t be helped since you’re so far away and can’t talk very often.”

“Yeah. But just the other day, when we finally talked after so long, she looked so relieved... It’s all thanks to you, Seina-onii-chan, for telling her all about me. So thank you.”

“I hope you can meet in person soon.”

“Yeah.” Sasami said with a happy expression, the smile of a girl her age.

Just then, a small truck pulled over on the road below, and Noike emerged from it.

“Washu-sama, were you here?”

Noike climbed the path leading up the ridge and ran briskly toward Washu. If she’d saluted, she would have looked just like a soldier.

“Washu-sama, I just heard from Kiriko-san that everyone is on their way here.”

“OK, got it.”

“Noike! Seina-onii-chan and Ryo-chan's little sister are here, too.” Sasami ran over to Noike, holding Ryo-Ohki and Fuku.

“Nice to meet you, Fuku-chan.”

Noike gently stroked Fuku’s head, then turned to face Seina.

“Hello, Seina-san. I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

With that, Noike gave a GP-style salute.

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask, now that the transfer order has arrived, has the matter with Melmas been settled?” During the bus ride, Kiriko quietly whispered to Neeju, who was sitting next to her.

“Seto-sama has already determined that the contest is over. Well, the actual mess is just beginning, though.”

“Is it really okay for there to be no shrine maiden on Melmas at a time like this? If there’s a campaign to oust you, wouldn’t that be problematic given your position?”

“That would just be a last-ditch effort. This isn’t a situation that can be resolved by simply making someone take the blame.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means it’s pointless for us to worry about Melmas right now. As for the sparks that might fly our way… it would be quite something if any sparks even flew, but brushing them off is just business as usual, isn’t it?”

“But… I see.”

Kiriko gave up, realizing further questions were pointless. Information wasn’t always something you got just because you wanted it. Especially when it came to political matters like this, it was hard to judge. In short, it wasn't something Kiriko and her group needed to worry about.

“Wow, what a magnificent carrot field.” Hokuto said with a sigh as they crossed the mountain pass and a vast field of carrots came into view.

“You know we have a ‘Premium Ingredients’ section at our store, right? Actually, we get a small supply of carrots from Tenchi-kun for that section.”

“Really? I see. The carrots here really are delicious.”

“That’s right. They’re sweet and full of flavor, and we have some passionate fans among our customers. They sell out the moment we put them on the shelves, so they’re known as ‘phantom carrots.’ We even get requests from famous restaurants who’ve heard the rumors, but the supply is just so limited…”

Hokuto gazed at the carrot field in the valley with a slightly envious look and said, “I wonder what they’re doing with all of them? I haven’t heard that they ship them anywhere, and when I ask Tenchi-kun, he just says, ‘We have a big eater here.’”

“W-well…”

Even Tenchi couldn’t bring himself to say that Ryo-Ohki was devouring all of them by herself.

“Well, it’s quite a crop. I can understand wanting to eat your fill. It’s just that a customer told me that if we entered it in a competition, it would definitely win the grand prize. I just thought it was a bit of a waste. Well, that’s just the shop owner’s logic, ahahahaha… Hmm? Oh, Noike-san… Tenchi-kun and Seina are here too.”

Hokuto noticed Noike, Tenchi, and the others in the field and slowed the bus.

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Tenchi had finished loading carrots onto the truck and was tending to his farming tools nearby. A little further away, the others were chatting with Seina.

“...Oh, so Noike-san is Seto-sama's adopted daughter? Seto-sama has been very kind to me in many ways.”

“Hehe, it must be tough, keeping up with Seto-sama, right?”

“Hmm, well, it’s complicated.”

Noike and Sasami shared a wry smile. Everyone associated with Seto seemed to wear the same expression.

“Thanks to that, we’re getting by just fine.”

“Ugh… I’ve heard that reaction from quite a few people… but honestly, I don’t really feel that way myself. If anything, Airi-san is the one who…”

“Oh... I suppose that must be tough for you, too. But I hear you’ve been doing quite well since you went into space. I’ve heard rumors about it from all over.”

“Not at all… It’s all thanks to everyone’s support. Washu-chan even gave me an amazing new ship…”

“It’s because you’re worth it, Seina-dono. Oh, speaking of Airi-dono, could you let me check your personal files later?”

“Yes, that's fine.”

Just then, the bus, having spotted Seina and the others, came to a stop.

“Uncle, this is fine, we'll get off here.”

Standing there were the Juraian royals and Washu. Kiriko and the girls immediately got off the bus.

“Well, Kiriko-san and everyone else. You could have just gone straight to the house.” Noike rushed up to Kiriko and greeted her.

“But that's not going to happen...”

Although Noike had said that, the people she was dealing with were the head of the main family and the princesses of the Juraian royal family. She couldn't just pretend not to know them and walk past. Kiriko looked to Tenchi for help.

“Kiriko-san. It’s not proper to exchange greetings in a place like this, so please wait for us at the house.”

“But…”

Even with Tenchi’s words, Kiriko couldn’t move right away. If anyone could just move at a word, it would be Amane, Ryoko, and Neeju.

“Perfect timing. I’m going to ride with them, so everyone get on board! Come on, come on, hurry up! Seina-dono, you can take your time and follow later.” Washu forced her way onto the bus, shoving everyone inside as if to break the deadlock.

“Alright, let’s go!”

Since Washu was pushing so hard, the others had no choice but to go along with it. Waved off by Tenchi and the others, the bus drove away.

“Noike-san. We’ve finished the urgent harvest, so shall we wrap up our work here as well?”

“Yes, understood. I’ll take care of this side of things, so Tenchi-sama, could you please go fetch Aeka-sama and Ryoko-san?”

“At the shrine? Got it… Oh, right! Shouldn’t Seina-kun come too? I’m not sure if it’ll actually work, but how about going to pray for protection against bad luck?”

“Hahaha… That’s a good idea. It’s been a while since I’ve seen the old man at the shrine.”

“Then I’ll take care of Fuku-chan.” Sasami hugged Ryo-Ohki and Fuku, then rubbed her cheek against theirs.

“Thanks, Sasami-chan. Oh, right! Senpai, why don’t we go by bike? I'm pretty amazing, you know.”

“Hmm… I did see that diving stunt earlier, though.”

Tenchi crossed his arms and tilted his head. After seeing something like that, it was only natural to hesitate. In Seina's case, what happened twice would happen not just a third time, but many times over.

“Ah...”

“Then let’s have a race. I’m pretty confident in my skills, too.” Tenchi flashed a challenging smile.

Chapter Nine: Funaho

Seina was racing down the mountain road on the Kai Special at even higher speeds than before. But...

“...Senpai...Seriously?”

Yet Tenchi was running through the mountains at the same speed, keeping pace with Seina. Ignoring the trees in the forest, he ran with incredible leaping ability, just like a ninja.

“You’re using Bio-Enhancement too, Senpai? Damn it, I won’t lose!”

His legs still had plenty of energy left. Seina picked up even more speed, determined to pass Tenchi.

“Alright, just a little more!”

Just as he was about to overtake him, Tenchi called out.

“Seina-kun, look ahead!”

“Huh? Oh!”

Thanks to Tenchi's warning, he realized the forest ahead was opening up. It was a place Seina recognized. It had felt far away when he was a child, but Seina's speed now was on a completely different level. Part of it was because they'd been racing, but he'd also lost his sense of distance to their destination. He slammed on the brakes, but the rear brakes was still broken from earlier.

"Watch out!"

Tenchi grabbed the saddle of the Kai Special, trying to slow him down. He placed his hand on a thick tree trunk to stop, but...

Crunch! Unable to withstand the force, the saddle snapped.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Although his speed dropped slightly, the Kai Special fell apart mid-flight, and Seina rolled at a considerable speed, kicking up a cloud of dust, and plunged straight into Funaho's Pond.

"Seina-kun!?"

Tenchi, with one hand on the tree trunk and the other holding the torn saddle, gazed at the massive spray of water.

"Bwahah!" Seina surfaced from the water, sending up a spray of water, and once he reached the shore, he slumped over, looking exhausted.

"Same as always, kid."

"Huh!?"

Seina looked up in a panic to find Katsuhito, who had appeared out of nowhere, staring intently at his face with a wry smile.

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"Thank you, sir."

"Well then, if you need a ride home, don't hesitate to ask."

"Okay."

With Kiriko and the others seeing him off, Hokuto's bus headed back down the way they had just come.

"Alright, everyone, follow me."

Acting somewhat like a tour guide, Washu began leading the way while holding aloft a banner bearing the unpleasant words 'His Majesty the Guinea Pig and Entourage.' Who knows where she pulled that from.

"Kiriko… what do you make of that?"

“...Apparently, for Washu-sama, that’s the highest compliment.”

“That’s a bit complicated, isn’t it?”

“Just don’t say anything unnecessary! We’re dealing with Hakubi Washu-sama, after all.”

Kiriko, looking sour, followed Washu through the teleportation gate and entered the research lab where Washu usually stayed. Amane and the others followed shortly after.

“That’s surprising. I was imagining a place that was more… eerie, with all kinds of suspicious-looking machinery.”

The place felt more like a beautiful gymnasium, with sunlight streaming in and a few small plantings here and there.

“Shh!”

Kiriko’s face turned pale as she pressed a finger to Amane’s lips. Loose lips sink ships. You shouldn’t say anything unnecessary in front of a Philosopher.

“If that’s the kind of place you’d like, I have plenty of them.”

“No, no, this is plenty good enough.”

Kiriko kept her finger over Amane’s mouth, desperate to move the conversation forward.

“Oh? You don’t need to be so polite.”

Washu watched Kiriko with a smirk. It resembled the timer on a ticking time bomb.

“Anyway, let’s get the checkup done first...”

“That’s right. I’d like to finish by lunchtime… So, everyone, take off your clothes. That includes any jewelry, too.”

“Yes! Come on, everyone, hurry up!”

If they dawdled here and Washu changed her mind, it would be trouble. Seeing Kiriko’s desperate expression, Amane and the others obediently began to undress.

“Oh my. Aren’t you going to say things like ‘Kya!’ or ‘No way!’? I was really looking forward to it.”

“Are we schoolgirls?! Besides, there’s nothing embarrassing about being among women. We take baths together, after all.”

Even Gyokuren was keeping quiet, but Amane just couldn't help but react to Washu's antics.

“This kind of thing is a given.”

“W-wait, this kind of ruins the image of the legendary genius scientist… Are you really that

Hakubi Washu-sama?" Amane stared at Washu with a look of suspicion.

To Kiriko, this was an unbelievable act of recklessness. While Airi and Seto were equally unpleasant individuals, Kiriko had certain tendencies and strategies to deal with them. But Washu was different. Moreover, being a legendary philosopher with numerous anecdotes, continuing a poorly executed conversation was highly likely to backfire. And yet...

"Cut it out, Amane!"

"But…"

"Amane-dono, wouldn't you find it a bit more convincing if you added 'Philosopher' before my name?"

".....I see. So, what Airi-sama did wasn't because she was special?"

Faced with Amane's nonchalant reply, Kiriko clutched her head in resignation, her energy drained.

"Hmm, very well, very well! Now that we've acknowledged the facts…"

Washu scanned the women who had taken off their clothes, her gaze settling on Kiriko, who was slumped over, drained from the mental strain.

"Well then, Kiriko-dono first."

"Y-yes!"

When Washu called her name, Kiriko reflexively stood at attention. Washu circled around her and began examining her body intently.

"Hmm... No abnormalities in your body. Your Bio-Enhancement level is about 8. You've sustained significant damage to both arms recently. You'll need a little adjustment."

"!!?"

There were no sensors in sight; Washu was simply looking at her with the naked eye. Kiriko's Bio-Enhancement level was top-secret information. Moreover, Kiriko stared at Washu with renewed astonishment, having just been so easily seen through regarding the damage to both her arms sustained during the battle with Tarrant.

"Relax a little. I'm not going to eat Tenchi-dono's relatives, after all."

Washu patted Kiriko on the butt a couple of times, then started walking toward Amane.

"Next up is Amane Kaunaq… Kaunaq's granddaughter, huh?"

"You know my grandfather?"

"They're a clothing company now, but they used to be a manufacturer of Guardian's. I know that guy well."

“But my grandfather never mentioned anything like that…”

“Heh heh heh. He was one of the guys I used to bully, you know. I bet he doesn’t even want to remember it. He used to have a hobby of taking secret photos. Does he still do that?”

“Ugh...”

Amane’s grandfather loved his daughter and granddaughter so much that he constantly monitored them on a screen. Amane forced him to stop, but her mother must have gotten used to it. She was still being monitored.

“I’m relieved to see things are still the same. No physical abnormalities, Bio-Enhancement Level 4… For someone with such miraculous looks, you’ve got the personality of an old man.”

“Mind your own business!”

“Hahaha. Alright, next up is Ryoko Balta. Balta’s granddaughter…”

“Yes. My name is Washu-sama's...”

“So they named you after Ryoko, huh. …Well, if you’ve gone up against Jurai, I suppose that makes sense, but try not to be disappointed when you actually see her.”

“No way! I would never do such a thing...”

“Hmm, Bio-Enhancement Level 2... A bio-enhanced human with specially modified transformation abilities, I see. In your case, I’ll run some tests on Elma too.”

“Y-yes.”

“Next up is Neeju Na Melmas, the Shrine Maiden of Melmas. No Bio-Enhancement, larval fixation treatment... This time, we'll release the larval fixation.”

“I've been told by Seto-sama that we should wait until the Melmas coup has settled down, is that correct?”

As expected, Neeju was less nervous than the others.

“I’m going to collect your personal data, so if that’s a problem, you can just create a stand-in.”

“Understood. Please proceed.”

“Next is Hakuren. Bio-Enhancement Level 6… a type specialized in thought acceleration, I see. Hmm.” Saying this, Washu pretended to be examining Hakuren’s body and slipped into Kiriko and the others’ blind spot.

“You four are from the other side, aren’t you?”

“!?”

Hakuren tried to keep her composure, but her hands were clenched tightly.

“I can tell, you know. Especially with royalty. Well, I don’t know what your situation is, but it sounds interesting, so I'm always available to talk.”

“……Yes.”

Without breaking eye contact, Hakuren whispered softly, just loud enough for Washu to hear.

“Now then, next up is Karen… Bio-Enhancement Level 5. That’s quite an ideally trained physique. But, heh heh, I can see a bit of mental fatigue. I suppose the cause is mainly that, isn’t it?” Washu pointed at Gyokuren with her thumb.

Gyokuren responded with an elegant bow.

“I am Gyokuren, Washu-sama.”

“Hmm… I suppose it can’t be helped if she’s paired with this one. Still, you have a miraculous appearance yourself… And the fact that you know how to use that weapon makes you troublesome. Bio-Enhancement Level 6.” Washu stared intently into Gyokuren’s eyes.

“Is that mental stability due to Seina-dono’s presence?”

“...Yes.”

That brief pause revealed Gyokuren’s surprise.

“Hmm. Quite interesting.”

Washu smoothly pulled away from Gyokuren. It was right at the very edge of Gyokuren’s danger zone.

“Now, speaking of interesting… wait, what?”

“Washu-sama, Suiren is right beside you.”

“Oh! Just as I expected.”

At Hakuren’s remark, Washu quickly moved away.

“As expected?”

“She doesn't let her opponent sense her presence. This girl is the type with a skewed probability distribution. Plus, her Bio-Enhancement level is 10.”

“10!?”

Hakuren and the rest of the group couldn’t hide their surprise. That number was enough to distort both body and mind, potentially turning her into a wreck.

“Suiren… You… what on earth…”

“Her special ability is probably due to Bio-Enhancement. It wasn’t this extreme before, was it?”

“That… might very well be true.”

“Once I get the detailed test results, I’ll decide whether to fine-tune it or de-tune it. Oh, and I won’t accept any objections. Now that you’re involved with me, I won’t tolerate any unsightly technical results. Though, your ability probably won’t go away.” Washu stared intently at Suiren.

Suiren gave a small nod, as if in agreement.

“Now, the real fun begins!”

At Washu’s signal, a black, slime-like object appeared. It was exactly what Amane had described as ‘gruesome’.

“W-Washu-sama… what is this?”

“Making its grand entrance to meet your expectations. The precision-scan monster, ‘Slimy-kun No. 3’ ♡”

“A monster!? Amane! That’s why I told you not to say anything unnecessary!”

As Kiriko and her friends tried to escape, ‘Slimy-kun No. 3’ attacked them, and they were swallowed up in an instant.

“...H-hello, it's been a while.” Seina, still standing in the pond, gave Katsuhito a slight bow.

“Hmm. I hear you’re still as unlucky as ever, even out in space. Ha ha ha!”

“……Well…… um…… hmm, wait, what?” For a moment, Seina felt as if someone had called his name, and he frantically looked around.

“Hmm, what’s wrong?”

“Ah, no. It’s just… I felt like someone called my name just now…”

“Are you okay?” Tenchi rushed over and peered at him with concern.

“Huh… Wait, what?” Seina gave a half-hearted reply as he looked around, searching for the source of the voice.

“There's only me and Tenchi here.”

“Huh? But I heard someone else’s… like, a voice…”

“Oh, I see, I see. You can hear it? Good, good. The one talking to you is…” Katsuhito slowly pointed behind Seina.

When he turned around, he saw the sacred tree standing there.

“The shrine’s sacred tree? …Ah!”

Seina had seen something very similar to this tree several times before.

“...I see. Why didn't I notice sooner...? Even though I’ve always seen it...”

A light emanated from the sacred tree, striking Seina’s forehead. The voice was like that of a child yet an adult, a voice with a ticklish sensation, reminiscent of a playful child.

“A Royal Tree! So that’s it! The sacred tree was always a Royal Tree!”

“That’s right. I am Funaho, the first-generation Royal Tree… I’m glad. I’m finally able to talk to you.”

“Huh?”

“Funaho has always wanted to talk to you. You who used to play here so often. You didn’t cry in front of others very often, but when things got tough, you’d hide somewhere in this village and cry, wouldn’t you?”

“W-well…”

“The trees in this village are Funaho's eyes and ears. They know everything about this village. That's why I just couldn't help but want to comfort you.”

——Seina… Seina.

——Don’t cry, because it won’t hurt, and you won’t be lonely.

——Because I’m here.

Those were the words Kiriko, Tsukiko, the people of Masaki Village, and the people of Masaki had spoken to Seina since he was a child. But all along, Seina had continued to sense something like the collective will of the entire village of Masaki, not just any one person.

“……I see. I thought it was just my imagination… but it was you, wasn’t it?”

——Because I’m here, you’ll be okay.

“Thank you… Thank you, Funaho. I’ll be okay now.”

At Seina’s words, a flurry of light filled with joy began to dance.

Gentle, gentle Royal Trees. Seina realized there was one more being watching over him, and he felt his heart grow warm. …But the touching scene was ruined.

“Hey, Tenchi! Tenchi!”

Ryoko came down from the sky, stepped on his head, and he sank back into the water.

“Hey, Ryoko!”

“Huh?”

Ryoko noticed Tenchi’s angry glare and looked down.

“……Long time no see.”

“Yikes!”

Seeing Tenchi’s unusually stern expression, Ryoko quickly moved away from Seina’s head and stood there flustered, unsure of what to do.

“What’s going on? It’s Seina, isn’t it? You were sunk down there so deep I thought you were a rock, ha ha ha ha!”

After thinking it over, she seemed to have decided to just laugh it off for now.

“Seina-kun. This is Ryoko, her other daughter.” Though exasperated, Tenchi whispered softly to Seina.

“Huh? Huh?”

“Washu-chan said this would happen...”

“...Huh? Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?? So Ryoko-san is Washu-san's daughter?”

“That woman is not my mother!”

Just as Ryoko glared at Seina in a huff, Aeka’s voice came from afar.

“Ryoko-san, Ryoko-san?”

“Oh crap!”

Just as Ryoko disappeared into the cave, a grumpy-looking Aeka appeared in her place.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! Ryoko-san, skipping your cleaning duties. Where on earth have you wandered off to? Oh, Tenchi-sama, have you seen Ryoko-san…”

It was only then that Aeka finally noticed Seina standing near Tenchi.

“...Oh my, are you by any chance Seina-san?”

“H-hello.”

“I heard you’d returned and was looking forward to seeing you. Please do make yourself at

home… but why are you in the pond?”

Aeka was slow to notice Seina because Seina was submerged in the pond. She simply assumed that no one could possibly be there. Of course, if it had been the unconventional Ryoko, Aeka would have recognized her immediately.

“Aaaah, no!”

Splashing water everywhere, Seina scrambled out of the pond in a panic. To be honest, the cold, clear water felt wonderful on his body, which was still flushed from cycling in the summer heat, and he’d actually wanted to stay in a little longer. That comfort was one of the reasons he hadn’t gotten out of the pond sooner.

“Heh… You seem to be having a hard time as usual. By the way, o-nii-san, where’s Ryoko-san?”

“Hmm, well, that is…”

Tenchi gave a wry smile as Katsuhito cleared his throat. During his conversation with Seina, Ryoko had been standing behind Aeka the whole time, making rude gestures.

“Hmph!”

However, Aeka was used to situations like this. Sensing what was happening behind her based on Katsuhito and Tenchi's reactions, Aeka turned around and threw her broom like a spear.

“Ouch!”

The broom hit Ryoko squarely in the face, and she tumbled head over heels, falling off the rock.

“Nice shot!”

It was just like a skit from a Kansai stage comedy. Katsuhito and the others gave Aeka the expected round of applause for her move.

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“Grr…”

“Grrrrrrr...”

The showdown between Ryoko and Aeka had turned into a standoff, with the two glaring at each other from above and below the cave where Ryoko had been sealed away, and it looked like it was going to be a long battle.

“Aren’t you going to step in?”

“Hmm... It's dangerous to interfere when things get like that. What do you think, kid? Would

you be willing to get in between them?”

“No way. Absolutely not.” Seina answered Katsuhito’s question immediately.

His instinct for danger was screaming at him that he absolutely must not go near that place. It felt like a whole fleet of ambulance sirens was blaring right in his ear.

“Hmm, that’s exactly it. Well, to kill some time, I’ll tell you something interesting. It’s a secret I couldn’t share with you back in the day.” Katsuhito said as he pointed toward the Demon’s Cave.

“You know about the old legend around here, don’t you? The one about the samurai who sealed away an evil demon?”

“Well… you used to scare the hell out of me with that story.”

Seina had been called out at night more than once, and Katushito really built up the atmosphere before scaring him. For several days after hearing it, he couldn't even go to the bathroom alone at night; it was quite traumatic.

“Actually, the young man who sealed that demon was me, and that over there is the sealed demon.”

“Hi.”

Ryoko, pointed at by Katsuhito, raised her hand.

“Huh? Ryoko-san is… a demon?”

But his confusion lasted only a moment. Upon further reflection, he had heard that about seven hundred years ago, the pirate Ryoko had gone missing along with the Prince of Jurai, and that they had killed each other. If that were the case, it all made sense. It wasn’t hard to imagine that the incident had become a legend over time.

The horn-like protrusions on Ryo-Ohki’s hull did bring to mind a demon. Thinking about the crystal hull glowing red that he saw when she came to help Fuku, it made perfect sense. If people on Earth were to see Ryo-Ohki in that form, flying through the night sky while letting out a terrifying screech, they would undoubtedly think it was a demon. Or perhaps they might have thought it was a dragon.

“...I can kind of picture it.”

“Pfft!”

Seeing Seina’s expression, Aeka couldn’t help but burst out laughing. It seemed the two of them had turned their attention to him.

“What were you imagining, Seina-chan? I’d love to hear about it.”

“……”

Ryoko looked displeased, but fortunately, since she was facing off against Aeka, she seemed unable to move from where she was.

“About seven hundred years ago, I sealed it away, but then Tenchi accidentally broke the seal… She caused quite a ruckus in Kurashiki, so it was a real mess.”

“……C-could it be that gas explosion at your high school……”

“That-was-me♡”

Amused by Seina’s shocked expression, Ryoko pointed at herself and grinned.

“Ugh, and the fire that destroyed Tenchi-senpai’s house in Kurashiki and the surrounding area…”

“Nope. That was Aeka. And she’s the one who destroyed Seto Bridge, too.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say! Seto Bridge was Ryoko-san’s fault, wasn’t it!?”

“...So the fire at Tenchi-senpai’s house in Kurashiki and the surrounding collapse were Aeka-san’s doing, then?”

“W-well… but Seto Bridge was definitely Ryoko-san’s fault!” Aeka’s face turned bright red with embarrassment.

As if to cover it up, she turned back to Ryoko and yelled at her. Incidentally, the collapse of Seto Bridge was caused by Ryo-Ohki and Aeka’s Ryūō getting tangled up and crashing into each other.

“If you hadn’t suddenly started a fight with me, it wouldn’t have ended up like that!”

“If you ask me, it’s all because Ryoko-san attacked Jurai in the first place!”

Just as Ryoko and Aeka's attention turned to this conversation, another conflict erupted over a completely different matter.

“Starting with Ryoko-san and then snowballing like that…”

“Well, that’s how it all started… Hahahaha.” Tenchi laughed awkwardly as the past he’d been trying to cover up was unexpectedly exposed.

“Tenchi-sama, Seina-san, it’s about time we headed home.”

Noike rescued Tenchi from that awkward silence. It was so perfectly timed, it was as if she had been watching from nearby.

Chapter Ten: Masaki Family Disturbance

Ignoring the fight between Ryoko and Aeka, Tenchi and the rest headed toward the stairs leading to the Masaki house.

Katsuhito stopped at the bottom of the stairs and said, “If you’re staying on Earth for a while longer, tell the other girls to come pay their respects at the shrine for protection against misfortune. So they can escape your calamity, even if just a little. Ha ha ha,” he laughed as he saw Seina off.

“...What about my own bad luck?”

“Your bad luck is made of a special alloy and is deeply ingrained, so it’d be a waste of time… Besides, it’s just a matter of mindset anyway.”

“That’s cruel… Ahh! Speaking of cruel, Grandpa! It’s Airi-san! Airi-san!”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“It’s not ‘what’s wrong with her,’ it’s ‘please do something about her!’ Airi-san is Grandpa’s wife, right? You know, like… help her relieve some of her frustrations or something.”

To put it bluntly, it was about relieving her sexual frustration, but he was too embarrassed to say that to his face. He was a little self-conscious about Katsuhito grinning as he listened, but he’d been trying his best to get the message across indirectly.

“That’s impossible.”

“What!? Are you absolutely sure?”

“She’s always been the type who won’t stop until she goes all the way. Though these days, it seems she goes all the way and then forces her way through, ha ha ha.” He laughed heartily, his expression seeming both carefree and resigned.

Well, Seina understood where he was coming from, but… “That’s why I’m asking you to rein her in a little…”

That said, in order to protect himself even a little from Airi’s wrath, Seina couldn’t just back down so easily.

“It’ll be fine! She’ll settle down once she gives birth to a one of your children.”

“……”

Seina's mind froze. Even Seina, who was so used to dealing with trouble, had lost his ability to think. For him, the cessation of his judgment was a matter of life and death. And now, that judgment had vanished.

“Hmm. It’s a feeling you lot probably can’t understand… Hey, can you hear me?”

“……I c-c-can hear you. I can hear you!”

It seems he finally rebooted.

“I can hear you, but I don't understand! I'll ask just in case, but you're speaking Japanese, right?”

“Alright, I’ll say it again. If you just give her a child she’ll settle down, got it?”

“...Oh, right. Grandpa's kid, huh? Man, that gave me a shock...”

“Ha ha ha! I said 'your child,' didn't I? …Hmm?”

After hearing Katsuhito’s words, Seina took a deep breath a short distance away and moved his body to get his blood flowing. He knew he couldn’t expect to make sound judgments unless he had oxygen flowing to both his brain and throughout his body.

“I can see why you’re panicking, though.”

“Grandpa, are you getting senile or anything?”

At Seina’s words, Katsuhito let out a soft chuckle and reached for his glasses. Then…

“Huh…?”

Right before Seina’s eyes, Katsuhito’s appearance transformed into that of a young Yosho.

“It’s been about seven hundred years since I first met Airi, and about five hundred and fifty years since we reunited and officially became husband and wife, I suppose? Well, rounding it down to five hundred years—what do you think of that span of time?”

“W-well, even just rounding it down, that’s a golden wedding anniversary…”

“That’s right. When you spend that much time together, your relationship changes. It’s not that we get bored of each other. It’s more like a sense of being one and the same. A relationship like siblings or parent and child, or even something higher than that. So even if the other person gets a lover, I don’t really mind. And I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if I got a lover either. Though she’d probably tease me about it just for fun.”

“I-Is that really how it is? I don’t understand it at all…”

“Of course, it varies from person to person. In Airi’s and my case, that’s just how it is. Besides, even when I say ‘lover,’ it doesn’t mean just anyone, I’m not that promiscuous. As for you, her nature as a Philosopher is just running wild.”

“The nature of a Philosopher?”

“It might surprise you, but Philosophers are a breed who deeply love technology, their research subjects, and the people and talents behind them. That’s why she finds your talent so utterly adorable. To the point where she wants to devour it, to accept it all. In that sense,

she’s terrifyingly pure and sincere. When you think of it that way, isn’t she cute?”

“...It's... scary.”

“Of course, I’m not suggesting you have a child with her. Doing something like that would be like making a pact with the devil. Your soul, everything, would be ripped right out of you… But the fact that she won’t stop unless you go that far means I can’t stop her! That’s what I’m trying to say.”

“I… I mean, you’re giving up on me.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Faced with Yosho’s expression, so serene and enlightened, like that of a high priest, Seina couldn’t say a word; he could only stand there silently, tears welling up in his eyes.

“I’d love to do something to help… but there’s nothing I can do…”

“Yeah, I guess it’s impossible.”

A short distance away, Tenchi and Noike watched Seina and Yosho’s exchange and muttered with expressionless faces. The space around Seina had turned into a world of pure white silence, as if time had stopped.

The next moment, Thud!! A bucket flying from somewhere hit Seina on the head. Instantly, time began to move again.

“Se-Seina-kun!?”

Seina stumbled on the stairs and fell, and Tenchi and Noike hurried down the stairs and rushed over to where he lay.

“...I'm sorry, kid. My exorcism won't bring you any comfort.”

Transforming back into Katsuhito, he looked in the direction the bucket had come from and saw Aeka and Ryoko standing there with awkward expressions on their faces.

Meanwhile, at Washu’s lab, Kiriko and the others were lying limp on top of the cushion-like ‘Slimy-kun No. 3’.

“Ugh! Ugh… ahh…”

Caught in a whirlwind of mixed pleasure and revulsion, the utterly exhausted girls didn’t have the energy to punch Washu, who was cackling away.

“Good work, good work! I mean, we got some great data. Mm-hmm!” Washu was practically dancing with glee.

“Now, as for what to do about the gel stuck to you... ① Have 'Licky-Licky-kun No. 1' lick it off. ② Have 'Wipey-Wipey-kun No. 5' wipe it off. ③...”

“Option 3: Take a bath, please!”

“Huh? Option 3 is 'Vacuum-kun No. 4'...”

“Option 3: Take a bath, please!”

As if to say, “We’ve had enough of this,” Kiriko and the girls slowly sat up, their expressions intense and menacing. Even Washu, usually unfazed, felt a chill run down his spine.

“O-o-o-okay, okay! Number 3: Take a bath, right? Got it! Now then, everyone, let me show you to the bath~~~!”

“Huh!? Eek! Eeeeeeeeeek!”

Kiriko and the others, who had been about to lunge at Washu, were tossed into the teleportation gate while still perched on ‘”Slimy-kun No. 3’.

“I’m truly, truly sorry.”

Aeka bowed deeply, looking genuinely remorseful as she apologized. Ryoko seemed to feel bad about it too, looking away awkwardly as she floated beside Aeka.

“It’s okay. It happens all the time.”

“I’m so grateful to hear you say that. Come on! Ryoko-san, you should apologize too!”

“Sorry about that. But man, you really have terrible luck. I didn’t even throw that bucket in your direction. It just flew off by accident.”

“Haha, well, that's nothing new.”

“Seina-san. Why don’t you take a bath?” Noike said as she couldn’t stand watching any longer.

Seina’s clothes and body were quite dirty from the string of mishaps.

“Huh, but…”

“I want to wash off the sweat too, so why don’t you join me?” Tenchi invited him when he saw Seina hesitate.

“I think your clothes will be dry by the time we get out.”

“That’s right, that’s right! Don’t be shy. Come on, Seina, let’s go!”

Whether she was trying to cover up the awkwardness or just felt like she’d found a fun toy, Ryoko suddenly grabbed Seina’s arm and dragged him along.

“Huh? Huh? Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa~~??” Leaving behind a scream, Seina was dragged away

Tenchi followed after him with a wry smile.

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“Phew… I managed to keep my underwear on, but…”

In the changing room, Ryoko stripped Seina of his clothes, and she nearly had his underwear pulled off as well. Tenchi arrived just in the nick of time to save him, but those shorts were then effortlessly pulled down and taken away by Noike.

“Just my shirt and pants would have been enough…”

“That kind of logic doesn’t work on Noike-san. She’s a housework fiend, after all.” Tenchi said, his gaze drifting off into the distance. Even he had his own underwear he’d rather wash himself.

“Huh… Anyway, this is quite a bath. When did you build it?”

The Masaki family’s floating bathhouse featured a large tub on the lower level and a smaller tub situated slightly higher up. Usually, Tenchi and the men who visited the Masaki household used the smaller tub.

“You can’t see it from the outside. It’s been here for quite a while.”

“Huh... Come to think of it, the curtain at the entrance says 'Women and Tenchi'...”

“Haha. Well, I’m the only man in the house, after all.”

“...I’ve been meaning to ask, but your dad lives in Kurashiki, right?”

“Yeah. He married his office worker. They live in an apartment.”

“The old man lives in the shrine's office...”

“That’s right.”

——He felt like a criminal cornered on a sheer cliff.

“...Tenchi-senpai, there aren't any other men here, are there?”

“W-well…”

“Hmmmmm……”

“I heard from Airi-san too. Seina-kun, you live with Kiriko-san, right? There were plenty of others there too, aren’t there?”

——The tables had turned. Tenchi wasn’t going to take a beating.

“I-I don’t mean it like that…”

“That must be tough, right?”

“……Yeah.”

“I totally get it.”

In the end, the two of them had just rubbed salt in each other’s wounds and ended up hurting themselves. They both let out a dry laugh and fell silent.

“Hey, Seina! Want me to wash your back?”

“Whoa!”

Suddenly, Ryoko appeared right next to Seina, materializing through the bathtub like a ghost. Taken by surprise, Seina fell headfirst into the tub.

“Hahaha! You really do love being in the water, don’t you?”

“...Ryoko, cut it out with the sudden surprises.” Tenchi, used to this, didn’t bat an eye. He scolded Ryoko, who was poking Seina’s feet as he lay sprawled right next to him.

“Were you surprised?”

But seeing that Ryoko showed no sign of stopping, Tenchi finally told her to cut it out.

“...You're starting to act more and more like Washu-san lately.”

“...Ugh!”

“Come on, move along, move along.”

“O-kay.”

Perhaps it was too much of a shock for her, because Ryoko reluctantly backed off. But Seina’s real crisis was yet to come.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Washu had suddenly teleported Kiriko and the others into the large bath below, as if they were illegally dumped bulk trash. And they fell right on top of Ryoko, who had just returned to the lower bath.

“Guh... Guh-gah-hah!”

Trapped under the water, Ryoko was bewildered by the sudden turn of events, but, “Uuuuuuuuugh! You’re heavy!” She stood up, flinging everyone off her.

“Kyaaa!”

Most of the women fell right back into the lower tub, but Kiriko, unfortunately, was flung into the upper tub where Seina and Tenchi were.

“What’s going on…?”

Tenchi and Seina tried to look down at the commotion, but realizing that the lower tub was for women, they stopped themselves. Had they not, Tenchi might have noticed Kiriko and reflexively caught her, averting disaster. But Kiriko, having been flung through the air, passed right in front of Tenchi and landed directly on top of Seina.

“Seina-kun!?……Ah!”

Tenchi turned around at the commotion coming from right behind him and locked eyes with the naked Kiriko. Seeing his relative, Kiriko, whom he considered like an older sister, naked, Tenchi's mind went blank.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!!”

Kiriko’s slap, delivered with tremendous force, hit Tenchi squarely. Taking the full brunt of it, Tenchi sank straight into the bathtub.

“Ten-chi-cha…n?”

Kiriko finally grasped the situation and frantically tried to help Tenchi, but only then did she notice the strange sensation beneath her buttocks.

“Ah... Aaaaaah! Noooooooo!”

It wasn’t clear exactly which part of Seina’s body Kiriko’s butt was resting on. But…

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“...Seina-kun, are you okay?”

Tenchi’s expression as he looked on with concern was troubled.

“Myaa?”

Ryo-Ohki, who had arrived later, saw the bright red handprint on Tenchi’s cheek and pressed her own hand against it to gauge its size. He suspected he was overthinking this, but

she acted as if she knew exactly what it meant.

“Ryo-Ohki… that hurts.”

Tenchi gently pushed Ryo-Ohki away, looking awkward, then peered at Seina’s face again. Fuku was also poking Seina’s face with her front paws, as if asking, “Are you okay?”

“Seriously, I could see a field of flowers.”

Fortunately, Seina hasn’t realized that it was Kiriko who fell on top of his head. But Kiriko, sitting in the bathtub below, was hanging her head, looking like she was about to die of embarrassment.

“Hey, don’t worry about it, Kiriko.”

“……I can’t face Seina-chan anymore.”

“Isn't that fine? You were going to show it to him someday anyway.”

“What?! Amaneee!!”

Thanks to Amane’s thoughtless remark, Kiriko quickly snapped out of her depression.

“It’s not my fault, you know…”

Even as she muttered this, Ryoko, who had caused the problem, seemed to feel guilty, especially considering the lingering autumn colors on Tenchi's cheek.

“It’s all Washu’s fault, anyway...”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m sure that’s exactly what happened this time. But more importantly…” Aeka agreed with Ryoko’s grumbling as she looked at Ryoko Balta, who was itching to speak up.

“Anyway, this person here says she has something to talk about.”

“……Hm?”

Waiting until Ryoko’s attention turned toward her, Aeka bowed deeply.

“Ryoko-sama, my name is Ryoko Balta. I used to be a pirate belonging to the Da Ruma Guild. Actually, my late mother named me after you, Ryoko-sama, the legendary pirate, hoping I would follow in your footsteps.”

“My name? … Hmm, your mother has quite good taste, doesn’t she?” Ryoko’s mood brightened instantly.

After all, nearly everyone in the Masaki family was of Juraian lineage. Both Washu and Mihoshi were on the Academy’s side, meaning everyone around her was on the enemy’s side. That didn’t mean they were on bad terms, but it was extremely rare for anyone to look at her with such respect.

“I’m truly honored. To be able to meet the esteemed Ryoko-sama in person like this is the height of my joy.”

“Ha ha ha! Well, you don’t have to be so stiff. I see, I see. Did you hear that, Aeka? She said she respects Ryoko-sama.”

This is exactly what it meant to be on cloud nine. Partly as a reaction to what just happened, Ryoko was over the moon.

“Well, considering what you did, I suppose that’s how it must seem to the pirates… You said your name was Ryoko Balta, didn’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

Ryoko flinched under Aeka’s piercing glare. After all, the Aeka standing before her was Ryoko’s enemy. And, until recently, her own enemy as well, the Princess of Jurai.

“Ryoko-san, if you truly respect her, you shouldn't have met her in person.”

“……Oh.”

Ryoko had braced herself for some harsh words, but hearing the same opinion as Washu left her slightly taken aback.

“If you don't know, you won't feel despair.”

“What do you mean by that, Aeka?”

“Exactly what I said. Night views are best enjoyed from a distance.”

“I'll return those words right back to you.”

“Oh? Are you saying we’ll continue with the shrine? In that case, I have no objection.”

Aeka and Ryoko glared at each other. But despite their words, there was no hostile atmosphere between them. If anything, they seemed more like close friends having a friendly argument.

(Chuckle)

The dynamic between Washu, Ryoko, and Aeka strangely felt harmonious. The backgrounds of those gathered at the Masaki residence were complex. The Academy, Jurai, Kuramitsu, pirates. It was the Galactic Federation itself. Yet here, none of that political complexity was visible. Perhaps it was the presence of Masaki Tenchi that made it so.

(……We’re the same, aren’t we?)

Just like the Masaki family, the Academy, Jurai, Kuramitsu, and pirates, Melmas was the same. And it was all starting to come together around the figure of Yamada Seina.

——It felt like something even more amazing was about to happen.

Seto, Airi, Mikami, Mitoto, and so many others. She realized that what this illustrious group expected from Seina was this warm atmosphere.

“Seina-san, your clothes are dry, so I’ll leave them here for you.” At that moment, Noike poked her head in from the entrance and called out toward the upstairs bathroom.

“Oh, thank you!”

“It’s almost lunchtime, so let’s hurry.” Tenchi said as he headed toward the washing area.

“I’ll be just a minute, so please wait for me.” Sasami said as she poked her head out from behind the curtain, then quickly pulled her head back and returned to the kitchen.

“Fuku-chan really likes cooking, doesn’t she?”

Fuku was there too, peering with interest at Sasami and Noike cooking from the counter connecting the kitchen and the living room. Their teamwork was impressive; while usually one person would finish a dish alone, the two of them had a complete grasp of each other’s cooking style. Noike would take over a task Sasami had set aside, and vice versa. It was like a circus juggling act, and the sight of multiple dishes coming together simultaneously was breathtaking.

“Amazing…”

Before they knew it, Kiriko and Karen had joined Fuku in the same spot, mesmerized by the two’s dazzling skills.

Meanwhile, Seina, having just gotten out of the bath, was seated on the sofa with what looked like a ball with a face on it perched on his head.

“Um… what’s this?”

“I’m conducting a personal check on you, so please bear with it a little longer.” Washu flashed a broad smile.

But the moment she did, Amane and the others glared at her with fierce expressions.

“W-Washu-sama, is that ball okay for personal use? Or is it a simplified measuring device?”

“Nope. I can measure perfectly well with this, too.”

It was an innocent, childlike, carefree smile. If the devil existed, this would surely be his face.

“Then what was the point of using ‘Slimy-kun No. 3’…”

Veins were clearly visible on Amane and the other girls’ temples.

“Oh my, does Amane-dono wish to see Seina-dono in a compromising position? Well, Amane-dono and the other girls looked quite alluring, after all.”

Actually, that scene was properly recorded on video. And that footage was guaranteed to turn any man into a rutting monkey. After all, even Washu was mesmerized by it.

(I'll give it to Seina-dono someday.)

But only after he properly became an adult. Before then, Tenchi would be terrifying.

"I-if that ball was good enough, then all our hard work..."

"Nya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

It didn't mean a thing! That's just the kind of laugh she had.

"Damn!"

Except for the two who were mesmerized by Sasami and Noike's cooking, everyone who had fallen victim to Slimy-kun's poisonous fangs clenched their fists tightly. But the only thing keeping their emotions in check was actually the delicious smell wafting from the kitchen. You can't fight on an empty stomach, or rather, your anger won't last.

Just then, a beep sounded from the ball, and suddenly, a number of small data monitors filled the ceiling of the open-concept living room.

"W-what is that!?" Ryoko, who had been perched on a ceiling beam, poked her head out in surprise.

"……Hah, ahahahahahahaha! This is a masterpiece!" Washu burst out laughing.

"What is this?" Amane asked.

"Since you said he attracts pirates, I ran a little simulation on Seina-dono's personal data. Well, it's quite something. Unconditionally, within a certain range, 23% of pirates are drawn in… Hmm? Heh heh heh, there's Ryoko's data too—this is great!"

"Don't mess with me! I'm not that stupid!"

"Ha! In your case, you're probably being drawn in by a bunch of different factors."

"Hmph!" Ryoko couldn't argue with Washu's assessment.

"It's entirely possible for someone like Ryoko-san. You look like you think so yourself."

"Ugh, shut up!"

Amane and the others were desperately trying to stifle their laughter at the exchange between Aeka and Ryoko.

"……"

Amidst all this, Tenchi alone stared silently at Seina, then shifted his gaze to Washu. His expression was serious, his eyes pleading.

“Everyone, please set the low table!” Sasami called out to everyone in the living room.

Aeka and Ryoko quickly stopped glaring at each other, and Tenchi sprang into action. Together, they moved the sofa and set up the low table. When it came to mealtime, Sasami’s orders were absolute. Otherwise, they’d be left without dinner.

In the blink of an eye, the table was set, and dishes and food were brought in one after another.

“Wow…”

It was a sight that made everyone sigh involuntarily. The fragrant aroma stimulated the appetite, and the array of dishes, a feast for the eyes, was enough to make even an amateur like Seina sense that something was different. Of course, last night’s banquet had been wonderful as well, but the aura emanating from these dishes was on a whole different level.

“Fumyaaa...n” Fuku was completely entranced by the sight.

“Now, everyone, take your seats. Seina-onii-chan, you’re here.”

Once Tenchi and the others were seated and Seina’s spot was decided, Kiriko and the others’ seating order naturally fell into place. They all took their seats in an orderly fashion.

“Alright, everyone. Eat up!”

“Let’s eat.”

At Sasami’s signal, everyone clasped their hands together.

“Delicious!”

After taking a bite, everyone’s eyes widened, and they murmured that without thinking. Kiriko and Karen, who had cooking experience, seemed particularly shocked.

“Huh… I had an idea of what to expect since I watched you cooking… But what I make is just prepared food. This is real cuisine.”

Though Karen was stunned by its flawless perfection, the taste was a heavenly delight that melted her heart. A look of sheer rapture spread across her face.

“As expected. I could never reach this level…”

“Unlike us self-taught cooks, Sasami-sama and Noike have undergone formal training. It’s almost like a martial art.”

It was the accumulation of years of dedicated practice that set them apart. From selecting ingredients and preparing them, to controlling the heat and timing the cooking process, there was absolutely no cutting corners or flaws.

“I see… You’re absolutely right.”

They remembered how beautiful it was to watch Sasami and Noike cook; it was like they were dancing.

“It’s only because the ingredients are so good. After all, starting with Tenchi-sama’s carrots, the ingredients used here are the same ones used in imperial cuisine.” Receiving such unreserved praise, Noike looked a little embarrassed.

“Both Sasami-sama and Noike-sama have really improved their skills.”

“It’s true. It’s been a long time since I’ve eaten something this good.”

Ringo was a member of the Imperial Family, and Amane was a young lady of the Kaunaq family. They both had extensive knowledge and experience when it came to food. Ringo, in particular, was studying culinary arts herself, so she could appreciate the level of Sasami and Noike’s skill.

“That’s right, Kiriko-sama! Why don’t we ask Sasami-sama and Noike-sama to share their expertise in prepared foods with us?”

“I see. That’s a good idea.”

“The shop? What are you talking about?” Perhaps intrigued by Ringo and the others’ conversation, Sasami gazed at them with sparkling eyes.

“Actually…”

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While cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, Sasami and Noike listened to Kiriko and Karen talk.

“I see. So it’s the menu for the bento boxes and prepared dishes they’ll serve at Seina-onii-chan’s family shop… That sounds fun. Let’s help out, Noike-onee-chan!”

“Yes. That’s a great idea. Please let us help out too.”

“Thank you so much. It’s such a relief to have the two of you helping out.”

“But thinking about the person who’ll be cooking, we can’t make anything too complicated. There are limits to the ingredients available, and time is an issue too…”

The person doing the cooking didn’t have the same skills as Sasami and Noike, nor could they use luxurious ingredients. It might be a bit of a stretch to say ‘after all’, but since these were side dishes sold at a local supermarket, they weren’t expecting restaurant-level quality. On the other hand, there were different challenges that restaurants didn’t face, such as when people would eat them, reheating them in the microwave, and deciding on the menu.

“I think the best approach is to start by deciding on the golden combination.”

“The ‘golden combination,’ you say?”

“It refers to cooking combinations that turn out reasonably tasty no matter who makes them. I’m sure you and Kiriko-san have recipes like that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I see what you mean. That’s certainly the safest bet.”

“If there’s anything from today’s lunch that you liked, I’ll share the recipe with you.”

“Noike-san. I’m heading out now, so please take care of things here.”

Just as Kiriko and the others were getting into their discussion, Tenchi, dressed in work clothes, poked his head through the curtain at the back entrance.

“Oh, are you leaving already?”

Noike followed Tenchi to see him off as he headed out to work in the fields. Sasami, Kiriko, and the others followed behind them. Outside, they found not only Tenchi but also Seina, Amane, and Ringo, all dressed in their work clothes.

“Oh, are you all going out together?”

“Well, let’s just say we have a little ulterior motive...” Seina scratched his head, looking a little embarrassed.

“Actually, we’ve decided to increase the amount of carrots we supply to Seina-kun’s shop.”

“Heh, I see… so that’s the ulterior motive. But is that really okay?”

Noike looked at Ryo-Ohki standing next to Tenchi. Most of the carrots in the field were for Ryo-Ohki.

“Ryo-Ohki has grown up and can control her appetite now. Besides, it’s for Fuku-chan’s master, right, Ryo-Ohki?”

“Myaa!” Ryo-Ohki raised her paw energetically in response.

“I’m sorry, Ryo-Ohki-chan. It’s for my family’s sake…”

Ryo-Ohki gave Seina, who looked confused, a smile that seemed to say, “Don’t worry about it.” Tenchi gently stroked Ryo-Ohki’s head.

“I see… Still, even Ringo-sama…”

“With a member of the legitimate royal family working so hard, I can’t very well be slacking off. Besides, I’d like to be of some help to Seina-sama as well.”

“...Well then, I’ll be heading out.”

Seizing a lull in the conversation, Tenchi headed toward the fields, leading Seina and the others while Noike, Sasami, Kiriko, and the rest who were staying behind saw them off.

“Good luck! I’ll bring you a snack later!”

Sasami and the others watched until Tenchi had disappeared behind the building, then returned to the kitchen.

“Well then, shall we get to what we need to do?”

“Kiriko-onee-chan. The shop’s prepared foods have desserts too, right? In that case, why don’t we use today’s snack as a test run for one of those?”

“That’s a good idea! Let’s do that!”

Making prepared foods was fun, but making desserts was something special. Sasami and Noike, of course, along with Kiriko and Karen, happily began discussing recipes.

Chapter Eleven: Washu's Tour

“Myaa. Myaa.”

With Ryo-Ohki leading the way, Tenchi and the rest were heading toward the fields under the strong sunlight. Usually, except during harvest season, it was almost always just Tenchi and her, but today there were a lot of people around. It felt just like a picnic or a hike. Ryo-Ohki was so happy and excited that she was practically floating on air.

“Myaa! Mya mya mya mya mya!”

The scent of grass, the smell of soil mingling with fermentation and decay. Perhaps Fuku was also excited by the intense summer nature and the raw scents, as she was running around wildly. She resembled an excited dog released from her chain for a walk. At that moment, Fuku discovered a fun game. Or, more accurately, a game she found fun.

It was a game of diving into the thick weeds and getting tangled up in them.

“Myaaan! Myaa! Myaa!”

After Fuku, who was thrashing about, was rescued by Seina, she repeated the same thing over and over again, never tiring of it.

“Look, you just took a bath, and now you’re covered in burrs.”

Fuku’s fur was covered in prickly, spiky grass. By the time autumn came and the grass turned brown and ripe, it would have completely covered her from head to toe, making for an even more spectacular sight.

“Fuku-chan really likes that kind of play, doesn’t she?” Tenchi asked with a smile.

“Yeah, that’s right. Actually, inside Kamidake there’s a natural residential area that looks like an Imperial Ship… When we went swimming there, she ran to the water’s edge just like

she's doing now. She was playing a game where she'd let the incoming waves wash over her… and before I knew it, she was buried in the sand with just her tail sticking out like a sea urchin."

"Was she okay?"

"I panicked and dug her out, but she was just laughing happily…" Seina said as Fuku once again ran into the bushes behind him and got tangled up.

"So, she kept repeating the same thing over and over, just like now?"

"Even though I knew there was no risk of her drowning, I was still worried… Amane-san even asked me, 'Does she have some kind death wish?'" Seina sighed and pulled Fuku out of the bushes, brushing off the burrs and dust.

"Ryo-Ohki was just like that when she was little. Once she started chasing butterflies, she'd run into trees and walls, fall into the river… It was a real hassle."

"Is there any good way to train her?"

"Hmm… I guess the only thing to do is keep a close eye on her and teach her little by little. Ryo-Ohki calmed down as she grew up, so I think Fuku-chan will too."

Ringo and Amane watched the two of them with a smile.

"W-what's going on? Why is everyone looking at us...??"

Noticing the stares, Tenchi and Seina looked at Ringo and Amane with puzzled expressions.

"It just looked like two new dads discussing parenting, that's all I thought."

"Huh!?"

Seeing Tenchi and Seina both blush at the same time, Ringo and Amane couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"...W-well, then, shall we start with this field today?"

Tenchi and Seina hurried up the slope as if fleeing, and stood at the edge of the field.

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Around three o'clock, Sasami, carrying a large basket, ran alone down the path to the field, while Noike and the others drove alongside her in a small truck to collect the heavy load of snacks and the harvested carrots.

"Wow!"

Reaching the top of the hill and coming to a spot where she could see the surroundings, Sasami stopped in her tracks, stunned. That was because almost all the carrots planted as far as the eye could see had been harvested, leaving the bare soil exposed. Normally, it

would take the entire Masaki family three days to harvest that much.

“Tenchi-nii-chan. That’s amazing.” Sasami said with a sigh as she approached Tenchi and the others, who were resting next to a neatly stacked pile of carrots

“They're all very efficient. Just a little instruction and they were able to do this.” Tenchi gave a slightly wry smile.

After all, in the Masaki household, Ryoko, Aeka, and Mihoshi weren’t quite full-fledged workers yet. In contrast, everyone in the Yamada household was a hard worker on par with Noike or Sasami.

“Oh, wow. Has the work already progressed this far?” Noike, who had stopped the truck and carried a large crate over, looked around and seemed pleased as well.

“Tenchi-sama, let’s finish packing away the carrots first, then have some tea.”

“No, with this much, I don’t think we can carry it all in one go, so let’s do that after tea.”

“Is that so? ...Oh?” Noike noticed Ryo-Ohki and Fuku, who were clinging to the case and looking up at her with eyes full of anticipation, from Tenchi’s line of sight. “Heh. You’re right. Then, Kiriko-san, Karen-san, please get everything ready.”

Following Noike’s instructions, Kiriko and Karen spread out a sheet under a tree that seemed just right and set up a small folding table. Then Noike and Sasami began arranging the desserts, which were in bamboo baskets, on top of it. The sheer number and variety of them was enough to open a small shop.

“Whoa!”

Needless to say, the sheer opulence of the spread drew gasps not only from Ryo-Ohki and Fuku but also from the women, who had a weakness for desserts.

“W-Wow, this is amazing.”

“We’re also using this as a test run for the desserts we’ll serve at Seina-san’s shop.”

Seeing Tenchi and the others’ reactions, Noike and the girls looked very satisfied.

“Kiriko, does that mean this is also…”

“I’ll ask for your feedback later.” Kiriko gave a sweet smile and handed them a basket containing wet towels.

“It comes with homework... but oh well.” Feeling excited, Amane wiped her hands with the hot towel.

The other women were already all set. They were just waiting for Sasami’s signal to go.

“Now, please enjoy your meal.”

“Nice, nice! This looks great!”

Washu was in the lab analyzing Seina and the girls’ personal data. Faced with data exciting enough to get her blood pumping for the first time in a while, Washu was getting even more into it.

“It was just a spur-of-the-moment idea, but things tend to work out better when you do that, don’t they? …But…”

Washu, who had been in high spirits, glanced at a separate window displaying certain data, her expression suddenly turning serious as she let out a small sigh.

“I guess I can’t help but let Tenchi-dono know about this… but well, that can wait!”

Washu closed the window as if brushing it away and stood up with a snap.

“Well then, now that this has happened, I suppose I’d better gather the others’ personal data as well… Heh heh heh.”

Washu flashed a smile that would make others flee, a smile that was so typical of a philosopher. Then, she put on her jacket and leaped into the gate for long-distance travel.

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“Yoo-hoo! How’s it going?”

Washu emerged in the Academy’s president’s office. The moment she appeared, a time-freezing barrier designed to protect classified information was activated, and time froze for Airi’s secretaries.

“Washu-sama, what brings you here so suddenly?” Airi was clearly displeased.

When Washu showed up without an appointment, it meant she had to be on her guard.

“As for you, Airi-dono… hmm, I don’t need you.”

“That’s quite a way to start. What exactly do you not need?”

“Ah, Mikami-dono. I’d like to take the personal data from your other body. Get it ready immediately.” Ignoring Airi, Washu approached Mikami. It was less of a request and more of an order.

“My personal data? If it’s an order from Washu-sama, I can’t say no… but could you at least tell me what you intend to use it for?” Refusing Washu would be futile, but she needed to at least prepare herself mentally. And possibly devise a strategy for the future.

“It’s about Seina-dono… I want to know how you feel. I need to determine if you’re worthy of being by his side.”

“Whoa, Washu-sama, you don't mean...!?”

Just as expected from a philosopher. Airi immediately caught on to Washu’s intentions.

“In that case, I’m the one! I’m the best!”

“If you’re feeling frustrated, why not just have your husband take care of it? You don’t need to hide it from Tenchi-dono anymore. And Yosho-dono looks like he’s got plenty of free time, too.”

“But Seina-kun is so much more innocent… don’t you think? ♡”

It was a level of flattery that was almost sickening. To a Philosopher, personal pride meant nothing when it came to achieving their goals.

“If you like shota, why don’t you just create a bio-artificial being? You’re a Philosopher, after all.”

“But Yosho-kun says he doesn’t want to.”

“Well, seeing that excited look on your face, I can see why he’d say no...”

Airi’s excited expression was the very embodiment of a Philosopher’s instinct. It was obvious that if one accidentally said ‘OK’, she’d demand some outrageous, antisocial play. That was even more likely coming from Yosho, who knew Airi so well.

“I want Seina-kun! I want Seina-kun!” Airi clung to Washu and burst into tears.

“Ugh! What an annoying girl!”

And just like that, Airi was frozen in time. It was a surprisingly simple conclusion, but behind it lay a technical battle of wits at the level of a Philosopher. One beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. However, it seemed she was simply no match for Washu after all.

“Well then, Mikami-dono. That troublemaker is gone.”

“……Understood. I can’t refuse when it’s for Seina-kun’s sake.” Mikami smiled as if she had completely resigned herself to her fate.

“What a good girl. I’ll show you heaven.”

“……Heaven??”

At that moment, a black shadow loomed over Mikami.

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After finishing her measurements on Mikami, Washu returned to her research facility. For security reasons, ultra-long-distance jumps for VIPs were restricted to use only between two specific points.

“Well, next up... I suppose I’ll tackle the troublesome part first.”

Washu’s next destination was, surprisingly, Mikagami’s bridge.

“Hello there~~~”

In the vastness of space, Washu was the only person who could stroll onto Mikagami, the nerve center of Juraian intelligence, as casually as if visiting a neighbor. Well, the Juraian Emperor did possess that authority, but he didn’t have the desire to willingly enter such a dangerous den of evil.

Washu walked straight up to Seto, who was sitting listlessly on the throne.

“Hmmmmm…”

Then, bringing her face so close they were practically touching, she stared intently at Seto’s face.

“What is it, Washu-chan…? This is so sudden…!”

“Ah, this way, this way! I’m going to borrow you for a bit. You other girls take care of things here.”

Ignoring the stunned court ladies, Washu grabbed Seto’s hand and dragged her to a secluded hut at the rear of the unit, accessible only to a select few.

“What’s with the sudden rush? Do you need something from me?”

“Not from Seto-dono. I have business with you, Kuisu.”

“……”

Seto stared at Washu without changing her expression in the slightest. After a moment she closed her eyes and said, “……How did you know?”

“How long do you think Naja and I were together?”

“Even though every single cell, even our memories, are the same? I’m not Naja’s shadow, but her mirror… If anything happens to Naja, I’m supposed to become Seto, you know?”

A stand-in merely mimicked one’s appearance, but she, the Mirror Warrior, was an exact duplicate, sharing every memory and ability.

“If something were to happen to Naja…. Ha! If she had even a shred of charm, nobody would have to go through all this trouble.”

“That’s true. But… I don’t think that data is necessary anymore. I can’t be anyone other than myself.”

“Is there a restriction that says you can only reveal your true identity to those who possess first-generation Royal Trees? But that might become meaningless, right? Thanks to Seina-

dono's power, that is."

"I'm not childish enough to expect that." Kuisu said without changing her expression in the slightest.

"But you do have your own memories, don't you? Why are you clinging to them so dearly?"

"That!?"

For the first time, a hint of confusion flashed across Kuisu's face. Those memories of Seina were as precious to her as her own life. They were what made her who she was, not just a mirror, but a person.

"How sweet. You're still such an honest, good girl."

Washu felt a surge of joy at the fleeting expression she caught in the mirror. Naja would never have let such an expression slip out like that. It was as if the Naja of the past were right there.

"……Understood. That is, if you promise not to use 'Slimy-kun No. 3.'"

"Tch! So you know after all. Maybe I should have left Mikami-dono for later?" Washu frowned, looking a little annoyed.

Satisfied with her little bit of payback, the mirror smiled contentedly.

"Well, according to Mikami-dono, 'If you want to get a taste of heaven, I won't stop you', that's what she said."

"Hahahahaha!"

"Hehe, I wonder if Minaho-chan should be the next victim."

"I've been wondering what to do about that girl… I just get the feeling she doesn't have much in common with Seina-dono."

"Really? Well, technically, Yuzaki and Kanemitsu's daughter is Seina-dono's fiancée, though…"

"That's a bit much, though. We'll wait until she's a little older."

"So you're still planning to use 'Slimy-kun No. 3,' then. In that case, just pick out a suitable candidate from among my subordinates who seems interested." Kuisu displayed a list of court ladies recommended by her subordinates.

"Oh my, selling out your subordinates. What a great boss you are."

"You weren't planning on going home empty-handed anyway, were you?"

"Of course not."

Inside that den of evil, the cheerful voices of two demons echoed.

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“Heh heh heh! Well, well, she’s still so naive! If it were Naja, she never would have let her guard down.”

Washu was happily skipping her way through the small town. After that, Washu, who had casually broken her promise, launched a surprise attack on Kuisu with ‘Slimy-kun No. 3’ and succeeded brilliantly.

“There’s no way I’d let a golden opportunity for footage slip by, Kuisu-chan. But I’m sure the day will come when you thank me for this… probably.”

Washu had a vague feeling that one day she would be able to give that video to Seina. That would mean Seina would one day overcome that restriction, though…

“Now then... that girl is up ahead, isn't she?”

Washu was currently in Kirche’s data space. She was passing through the researchers’ facilities and heading toward a small house on a hill. There were many researchers there, but no one realized that the girl wearing glasses and a bandana was none other than Hakubi Washu. Suddenly, Washu stopped and compared the townscape she had just passed with the house she was heading toward.

“Hmm… nice taste.”

Neither ostentatious nor girlish, the place had the feel of a calm, peaceful countryside, a scene created by Kirche. It was also the mental landscape of Seina, reflecting Kirche’s wish to live with him. It was, so to speak, the shape of her heart.

Washu approached the front door and was about to ring the bell when she heard voices coming from the backyard.

“Oh my! So what does that letter mean?”

“Ah, well, all the data on Miki was organized into a random number table, and I figured out that it was part of a set of coordinates, but…”

“Hello, young lady.” Washu went around to the back and called out to Kirche, who was talking with Hiroshi there.

“Oh dear! Are you a guest? I’m so sorry, I was so engrossed in our conversation that I didn’t notice you.”

Quickly securing the pure white sheet with a clothespin, Kirche rushed over to Washu. Washu removed her bandana and glasses, revealing her true face.

“My, how adorable. Are you a new researcher?”

“What!?”

In stark contrast to Kirche, who asked cheerfully, Hiroshi was so shocked that he stared at Washu with his mouth hanging open.

“Actually, I came here to say hello before I use Kirche-dono’s personal data.”

“Well… but…”

“I’ve already received the data from Airi-dono.”

“Is that so? Then please feel free to use it.”

Her eyes were like those of a puppy that didn’t know how to distrust people. She was completely unaware of the danger of having her personal data collected by a Philosopher. Of course, if Washu wanted it, resistance would be futile. Naturally, Washu had not the slightest intention of misusing the data regarding matters involving Seina.

“Y-you… is that outfit some kind of joke?” Having finally managed to suppress his unease, Hiroshi managed to utter just that.

“Well, I’m busy, so see you later.”

Ignoring Hiroshi’s question, Washu turned on her heel and walked toward the town.

“Wait! Um… what’s your name?”

“Since that boy over there seems to know, why don’t you ask him?” With that, Washu waved enthusiastically at Kirche and disconnected from the digital world.

Kirche bowed in return and turned back to Hiroshi.

“Um... Hiroshi-san, are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“A ghost... that might be exactly what it is...”

“Huh?? What!?”

“If my eyes and memory serve me correctly, and if her appearance is real... she is, she is the legendary philosopher, Hakubi Washu.”

“Hakubi, Washu-sama!?”

Even Kirche recognized that name. No, at least for those living at the Academy, the name Hakubi Washu carried the same weight as Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, or Tokugawa Ieyasu did for the Japanese.

“Is that really her? But Washu-sama is surely…”

“There are rumors that she is still alive… Otherwise, we might have actually seen a ghost…”

The two of them stared intently at the spot where Washu had vanished, for what seemed like an eternity.

Having finished their work for the day, Tenchi and the others gazed toward the Masaki house, bathed in the light of the setting sun.

“It’s a beautiful view,” Seina murmured.

At this time of day, it was time for Seina, who had been playing in Masaki Village, to go home. It marked the end of a fun time, the time to return to the real world. That’s why he always felt a little melancholy when this time came.

“Are you going to stay here forever, Senpai? Don’t you ever think about going out into space?”

“Hmm… I don’t know yet. But it’s true that there are still a lot of things I want to do here.”

“Things you want to do?”

“I’d like to grow more kinds of crops, and I’d like to try pottery too. Make bowls and tableware and stuff. I’m learning bamboo crafts in Masaki Village.”

“Could that be the basket the sweets were in was made by you?”

In response to Seina’s question, Tenchi nodded without looking up.

“...Is your ultimate goal to be self-sufficient?”

“Huh… That sounds fun.”

“Seina-kun, is there anything you want to do?”

“I’m swamped with my current job, so all I can think about is becoming a full-fledged professional as soon as possible.”

“I see…”

That was a typical answer for Seina. Taking things one step at a time, that was Seina’s nature. Though in Seina’s case, it was unclear whether he’d actually be able to move forward…

“Hey, Seina-kun. What if... just what if. Not right away, but if I asked you to come back here, what would you do?”

“Huh?”

“Ah! Never mind, forget I said that. I just got a little nostalgic…”

Seina, Tenchi, and Kai used to be together all the time. But by the time they entered middle

school, they'd each made more friends, and after high school started, Tenchi moved to his family home in Kurashiki, so they saw each other less often.

"That might be for the best. For me, Earth was mostly a place of hardship… but coming to Masaki Village made me realize that, after all, Earth is my home."

Even those born and raised in outer space had a home. Usually, it was the nearest planet, star, or other celestial body. And no matter where they were in the universe, their thoughts drifted toward the direction of that celestial body. It was similar to feeling the ground beneath your feet. By firmly recognizing Earth as his home, Seina felt as if a core had formed within him.

"I'm glad you feel that way." Tenchi said nothing more.

But that was enough for the two of them. The wind blowing through the valley felt pleasant, and they gazed at the scenery for what seemed like an eternity.

"……"

A short distance away from Tenchi and Seina, Noike, Kiriko, and the others stood silently, watching the pair intently. Neither Tenchi nor Seina were old enough to be called young adults yet, but they exuded an aura of presence that was breathtaking. The carrots had been loaded, and they were ready to head home, but everyone present was so captivated by the atmosphere surrounding the two that they had all forgotten to say anything.

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It was Washu who greeted Tenchi and the others when they returned to the Masaki household.

"Welcome back. Good work today. The shuttle bus is here, so those heading home should hurry."

At Washu's words, Amane and the others hurried off to take a bath. Seina handed Fuku over to Sasami and went to help Hokuto, who was carrying in the carrots.

"Tenchi-dono." Waiting until Tenchi was alone, putting away his farming tools, Washu quietly approached him.

"Seina-dono's test results are in." Although there was no one else around, she whispered into Tenchi's ear as he crouched down.

"!!……So, what were the results?"

"I'm sorry, but..."

"……Is that so?" Tenchi's face had gone pale. His hands were trembling slightly, and his eyes were unfocused.

"I can talk to him about it too, you know." Washu gently placed his hand on Tenchi's back

and said softly.

“No... This is something I need to talk about.”

“I see. All right.” Washu gently placed her hand on Tenchi's cheek and kissed him tenderly, as if he were a child.

“Thank you.”

Tenchi’s hands stopped trembling, and his expression became calm and composed.

Chapter Twelve: Reunion: Tsukiko

“Well then, Senpai, please take care of Fuku. Fuku, listen carefully to what everyone says and be a good girl. I’ll come pick you up tomorrow.”

“Myaa!” Fuku meowed happily from atop Ryo-Ohki’s head.

Tonight, Fuku would be staying at Tenchi’s house all by herself.

“It’s close by, so I’ll contact you right away if anything happens.”

“Please do.”

“I’ll take full responsibility for fixing Seina-dono’s bike.”

“Um... I'll be riding it on Earth, so... please be gentle.”

“Huh?!” Washu pouted in displeasure.

It seemed she was absolutely determined to make some weird modifications if he hadn’t said anything.

“...Hey, Seina-kun. I know you have plans with Tsukiko-san today, so it can’t be helped, but how about staying over at my place tomorrow? There’s a lot I want to talk to you about... What do you say?” Tenchi called out to Seina, who was about to board the bus, as if he’d just made up his mind.

“Um… Sure, I’d love to. I don’t really have anything to do at home anyway… if it’s not too much trouble for you.”

“Then it’s settled! I’ll be waiting for you tomorrow.”

Tenchi watched Seina board the bus, looking relieved.

“Tenchi-kun! Thanks for the carrots. I’ll bring the earnings report over soon to thank you.” Hokuto said as he leaned out the driver’s side window and gave a smiling nod. He looked genuinely happy to have been able to buy Tenchi’s carrots.

Tenchi returned a small nod.

“Alright, I’m off then.” Hokuto said and pulled his head back inside the window and started the bus’s engine.

“Thank you for everything.”

Kiriko and the others waved from the window of the moving bus. Tenchi’s group waved back until the bus disappeared from view.

It was an easy walk for an adult to Masaki Village, and by bus it took less than five minutes. Before the lingering emotions of their farewell to Tenchi had even faded, the bus entered Masaki Village.

“Kiriko, Seina-chan!” Tsukiko was waiting in front of her house, waving at the bus.

“Tsukiko-san!”

For a moment, he was reminded of Kuisu’s words on Jurai, but Tsukiko’s smile and the village scenery dispelled that thought. However, Seina couldn’t help but say ‘Tsukiko-san’ instead of ‘Aunt Tsukiko’.

When Seina stepped off the bus as it pulled up, Kai, hearing the sound, came out as well.

“Oh! My dear friend!”

Kai, sporting a hairstyle meant to look as grown-up as possible and a tuxedo he’d somehow managed to get his hands on, came over with a beaming smile. He’d probably been staring at the mirror right up until the last minute.

“Everyone, thank you so much for coming all the way out to this backwater…!!” Kai said, looking at Amane and the others who had gotten off the bus, then froze as if someone had pressed the pause button.

He immediately grabbed Seina’s hand and, as if fleeing the scene, dragged him behind some bushes a short distance away.

“What? What's wrong, Kai?”

“W-w-w-what?! Who are those people?!”

“Huh? What do you mean? Those people are my colleagues...”

“That's not what I'm talking about! I'm asking about that super-hyper-ultra-deluxe beauty! She looks completely different from the picture... It's a lie... It's a lie! Does a person like that really exist in this world!?”

“Ah, I see. Well, I understand how you feel.”

“Seina. Pinch my cheek really hard. Otherwise, I’m going to pinch you!” As if asking for a

kiss, Kai closed his eyes, his cheeks flushing as he leaned in.

“Ugh!” It was so disgusting that Seina reflexively punched Kai.

“Gwaah!”

That was the power of Bio-Enhanced Seina. Kai rolled around and fell into the bushes.

“Ah… sorry. Are you okay?”

“Hah… hehehehe. Seina, that was a good punch. Thanks to that, I realized this is real.”

Speaking like the protagonist of a story, Kai steadied his trembling legs and staggered to his feet, a stream of blood dripping from his nose.

“W-well, that’s a relief.”

“Ha ha ha! You super-duper hyper-ultra-deluxe beauties~~. Nice to meet you. I'm Seina-kun's best friend...”

Unfazed by the damage, Kai turned around, striking a bold pose—only to find, sadly, that the bus had already driven off.

“W-w-w-what?! Why? Why? Why??” Shocked, Kai slumped to his knees. He’d played the part of the hero right to the very end.

“It goes without saying! I can't be expected to put up with your idiotic comedy act forever!” Tsukiko looked down coldly at her son, snapped those words at him, and promptly went inside the house.

“She said to say hi to your funny little brother.” As she walked past, Kiriko gave Kai a light pat on the shoulder with a blank expression.

“No… no way… No! It’s not too late even now! Seina! Come on, let’s go to your house… gah!”

Kai grabbed Seina’s hand and tried to run off. But he was met with a spectacular neck-slash from Tsukiko, who had burst out of the house, sending Kai collapsing to the ground.

“Ugh! You’re such a pain.”

“...You haven’t changed a bit.”

“And to think he’s a high school student. It’s a real headache.”

“Y-you haven’t changed a bit either, Tsukiko-san.” Seina looked away, embarrassed.

That was because Tsukiko still had her leg raised, just as she had when she’d delivered the heel drop to Kai. Her slender legs were truly beautiful, possessing a purity reminiscent of a drawn katana. With her leg raised, the fabric of her skirt clung tightly to her waist, accentuating the shape of her firm buttocks.

“Ah! Oh no… Ahh, I forgot to say ‘welcome home’!” Tsukiko shyly lowered her leg and took a deep breath, as if to calm her nerves.

She took a deep breath, straightened her hair and clothes, “Welcome home, Seina-chan.” She said with slightly moist eyes.

“!!”

Those eyes reminded him of the incident with Kuisu, who had disguised herself as Tsukiko on Jurai. The flushed expression she’d had after kissing Seina overlapped perfectly with Tsukiko’s current one. Seina’s heart began to race, and he desperately tried to suppress the feeling that his face was about to turn bright red, though he wasn’t sure how effective it was.

“I, I’m home.” He managed to say, unable to get any more words out, yet he couldn’t look away, as if drawn into Tsukiko’s eyes.

To an outsider, they must have looked like a couple gazing into each other’s eyes.

“Mom! Seina-chan! How long do you plan on standing there?” Kiriko, looking annoyed, grabbed Seina by the arm and dragged him inside.

As the tension in the air eased and Tsukiko snapped back to reality, she quickly followed after the two of them.

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“Hey, Mom. I get that you’re happy Seina’s back, but aren’t you treating me a little harshly?” Kai, who had been left lying outside and forgotten, sat at the dining table, sulking.

“Seina-chan, how does it taste? It’s been a while, so I hope the flavor hasn’t changed.” Tsukiko kept staring intently at Seina’s face. Of course, she also wanted to ignore Kai, who had made a fool of himself in front of her guests.

“It’s really delicious.”

Seina was eating was Tsukiko’s curry. It was made with care, using carrots from Tenchi,

summer vegetables harvested in the village, and chicken raised by Kei-san, Tairō-kun's grandmother, all meticulously prepared and cooked slowly over time, though the curry roux was store-bought. In a sense, it was a very ordinary curry that any household could make, but Seina believed this curry was the most delicious in the world.

"……"

Kiriko looked a little frustrated as she ate the curry. In fact, Kiriko made a more authentic curry, and Seina told her it was delicious. But it was clear that Seina clearly preferred Tsukiko's curry. So sometimes, she tried making it using the same recipe as Tsukiko, but she just couldn't seem to replicate Tsukiko's flavor.

"But seriously, it's been about six months since I last had Mom's curry, hasn't it?"

"……"

His Mom ignored him.

"Sis, listen to me. Even when I ask her to make it, she rarely does, but the moment she found out Seina was coming home, she started prepping the ingredients the day before."

"……"

His sister ignored him too.

"……Mom! I want seconds!"

Ignored by Tsukiko and Kiriko, Kai reluctantly held out his plate.

"Seina-chan, would you like seconds?"

"Oh, then I'll have some."

Tsukiko took Seina's plate with both hands, and then, as if on cue, roughly snatched Kai's plate as well.

"Am I just an afterthought to Seina's?"

"You're always complaining about the amount of rice, how it's served, and to top it all off, the balance of the curry ingredients. If it bothers you that much, just serve yourself."

"Oooookay. So, Seina. Seriously, where are you working? Tokyo? Or maybe Osaka or Fukuoka?"

"Well...um..."

Kai was talking about what happened when he was taken away on the transport ship. At the time, Seina didn't understand the situation and blurted it out. Now he was confused about how to cover it up.

"Is that it? You were talking about space or something, did you end up working at some kind

of theme park attraction?”

“Well, um...”

“Hey! I’ve explained this to you so many times, but you don’t listening at all!”

To help the flustered Seina, Tsukiko roughly placed a huge bowl of curry in front of Kai.

“If you really want to know, I’ll explain it to you in detail next time.”

“Yayyyy, curry!”

Interrupting Tsukiko, Kai began devouring his curry. Tsukiko's lecture continued for hours while he sat on his heels. This meant Kai would never again hear about Seina's destination.

“Haha… Let’s eat.”

With the crisis finally over, Seina slowly savored Tsukiko’s curry.

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After having two more servings, Kai lay down, rubbing his full stomach, and stretched.

“Kai, go take a bath with Seina-chan! You were lying in the garden and got all muddy, after all.” Tsukiko called out from the kitchen as she tidied up.

“A bath, huh… Okay!” Kai broke into a huge smile and sat up with a start. “Let's go take a bath at your house!”

The summer days were long. It was still faintly light outside.

“Right now?”

“I heard your house has a brand-new, spacious bath! I want to see it!”

“...So, what's the real reason?”

“I want to peek at those super-duper hyper-ultra-deluxe beautiful ladies taking a bath, aaaand, I want to enjoy the leftover bathwater... gah!”

Tsukiko landed a perfect heel drop right on Kai’s head. At that very moment, Seina caught a glimpse of Tsukiko’s pure white panties through the slit in her skirt.

“!!”

Although he quickly looked away, his bio-enhanced vision had firmly burned that fleeting, alluring sight into Seina’s mind. It was crystal clear and vivid.

Tsukiko was just as flustered. The sheer stupidity of her son had made her blood boil, and in her eagerness to stop him as quickly as possible, she’d delivered the heel drop along the shortest path. By the time she realized the angle meant Seina could see her underwear,

she'd already gained too much momentum to stop herself.

"...Seina-chan is so naughty." Though she knew it was her own fault, Tsukiko, who had been clearly seen by Seina, pressed her skirt down and, in a tiny, faint voice, said before fleeing into the kitchen.

She slammed her face down onto the table with a thud at the exact same moment Kai passed out, foaming at the mouth.

"Kuisu-san… This is all your fault."

Seina, who was lying face-down, muttered that at the exact same moment Tsukiko said it in the kitchen.

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Seina carried the unconscious Kai to his room, spread out a futon, and laid him down on it. He'd thought he might wake up while he was carrying him, but Kai remained limp and lifeless.

"...At times like this, Bio-Enhancement really comes in handy."

Carrying a sleeping person required more strength than usual. Kai wasn't particularly big, but he still weighed over fifty kilograms. It made things a lot easier for the person doing the carrying if the other person clung on or distributed their weight properly.

(I guess I'll take a bath soon.)

Just as he thought that, Tsukiko's faint voice drifted in from outside the room.

"...Seina-chan"

"Tsukiko-san?"

"I'm sorry, please just listen." Tsukiko quickly said as Seina was about to step out into the hallway.

"……I'm sorry. It's just… I don't have the confidence to talk to Seina-chan face-to-face."

"Huh?"

"I'm embarrassed… I'll end up making a fool of myself."

It felt strange to talk to Tsukiko like this, but Seina felt the same way. He was too embarrassed to speak calmly.

"Kuisu-san, right?"

"She's a real pain. I'm sure she didn't mean any harm, but... she's clearly doing this on purpose. And what's worse, her analysis is correct, which makes her even more troublesome."

"……Correct?"

That meant Kuisu was right about Tsukiko's feelings for Seina. Seina's heart began to pound like a drum. It was true. Even though it came through Kuisu, this was the first time in his life he had ever experienced a declaration of love.

"I've been thinking about this for a long time. What would have happened if you had stayed on Earth?"

"What would have happened...?"

Seina had thought about that too. But every time, he was simply forced to face the reality that he had practically no choices at all. It was something that wouldn't change no matter how old he got or what new knowledge he gained. Like a visual novel with a single, unchanging path no matter how far he went.

"If things went well, high school, but college would be out of the question. So after graduating, I'd probably end up being a burden on Masaki Village… that was always my conclusion."

"My conclusion is that we'd live together in this house."

"Y-yeah, I guess so. If Tsukiko-san says so, then that must be how it would be."

Seina had intended to live in an empty house in the village, but if Tsukiko wanted that, he had no reason to refuse.

"Huh? So that means…"

The plan Tsukiko had previously discussed with Kiriko suddenly flashed through his mind. It was an option that had only emerged now that he knew the true nature of Masaki Village.

"Just like Kiriko, I've been watching Seina-chan all this time... So I knew I was bound to fall in love with you."

"!!"

Seina's face instantly turned bright red. He almost panicked. He was used to trouble, but a declaration of love was a different story. For Seina, who had absolutely no immunity to people's affections, it was an emotion close to deadly poison. Moreover, love was like an extremely precious item that he thought he could never obtain in his lifetime. Even if it was Kai's mother, now that he knew Tsukiko's true identity, that was no longer an obstacle.

"In ten years, I'm sure it won't feel strange anymore. To anyone who sees us, we'll have become a couple that's perfectly suited for each other."

If Tsukiko's appearance stayed the same, they would definitely be a good match.

(Though, whether we're actually a good match… I have my doubts…)

“We’ll definitely be a perfect match!” Tsukiko said firmly as if reading Seina’s mind.

“But Seina-chan went to space. Our paths no longer crossed. But I thought that was okay. Because I'm still your aunt. And you are my son's friend, a boy who has a crush on my daughter...”

So Kuisu had essentially skipped over those ten years.

“I still want to be your aunt. I want to watch over your future as your aunt.”

“...But”

But where should Tsukiko’s feelings of love go? Where should those feelings, now that she’s realized them, go? And where should Seina’s feelings go, now that he knew?

“The nature of marriage, you see, doesn’t change much even if you have a lifespan of thousands of years. You’re drawn to each other, you marry, sometimes you part ways, and you repeat the cycle of new encounters. But there are also many differences. On Earth, people give birth to and raise children, and their lives end with the passing down of wisdom. But for us, with our long lifespans, we don’t devote our entire lives to that. A marriage that lasts hundreds of years creates a bond even stronger than blood.”

“Stronger than blood?” At that moment, Seina recalled his conversation with Yosho at the shrine.

“A spiritual bond. A conscious bond, a bond as a community called marriage… There are many kinds. Over the course of hundreds of years, that creates a bond that’s stronger than blood. A kind of spiritual family. And while maintaining that strong bond, it’s not uncommon for each of us to form relationships with other partners from time to time.”

In other words, it was a situation where a married couple could each have a different lover. On Earth, that would be considered adultery, but in space, that concept didn’t exist. Of course, there were no legal issues either. Emotionally, it was the same as siblings finding spouses for each other.

“So you and I might cross paths again in a few hundred years. For now... that’s enough. After all, we’re still young.”

“Young... is that so?”

“Yes. The current average lifespan is two thousand years. If we assume an Earthling lives to be eighty, that’s about twenty-five times longer. On a cosmic scale, our age difference is less than a year.”

“When you put it that way, that’s certainly true.”

Tsukiko had come to her own resolution, and her voice was bright. If that was the case, Seina had no objection with that conclusion. It was also true that the similarities between what Tsukiko and Yosho, both people he trusted, had said made it easy for him to accept Tsukiko’s explanation.

"...Somehow, I really feel like I'm not an Earthling anymore."

"Hehe, I suppose so. Well then, you go take a bath first, Seina-chan."

"Okay, Aunt Tsukiko."

Aunt Tsukiko. Seina was happy to be able to call her that. The next time they met, the two of them would be able to look each other straight in the face.

"Hey, Kiriko, do you want to take a bath together sometime?" Tsukiko called out to Kiriko, about thirty minutes later, after confirming that Seina had gotten out of the bath

Tsukiko's expression was remarkably cheerful, which made Kiriko both suspicious and curious.

"...You look really refreshed. What's going on?"

"Come on, let's go."

Without answering Kiriko's question, Tsukiko headed toward the bathroom.

"Wait a second!"

Like a chick following its mother, Kiriko quickly followed Tsukiko.

Even after reaching the changing room, the two remained silent as they began to undress. Though in a few years they would likely look like two peas in a pod, even in the simple act of undressing, the allure contained within them was worlds apart.

"Ugh!" Kiriko couldn't help but feel self-conscious in front of Tsukiko, instinctively tried to cover herself despite her fully matured, voluptuous figure, one that could even be called curvaceous.

Feeling her daughter's inner conflict behind her, Tsukiko pretended not to notice and stepped into the bathroom.

Even in the bathroom, Kiriko's insecurities were being constantly stoked. It continued with every single movement, from rinsing her body with hot water to stepping into the tub.

"Phew…" With her shoulders submerged in the water, Kiriko exhaled deeply, finally seeming to calm down.

"Hey, Mom, about that question from earlier…"

"Seina-chan and I are back to how we were before."

"What!?"

"Is that so surprising? If it weren't for the whole Kuisu-sama business, we'd just be back to

how things were. Forget about me. What about you, Kiriko? Have you finally made up your mind yet?”

“Huh, made up my mind…?” Kiriko pretended not to understand, even though she knew it was pointless. She knew it, but for Kiriko, it was a trauma that was difficult to overcome.

“They’re such charming girls… It seems some of them have already made up their minds.”

“But I!… I…”

“Even though your body is fully developed, you know.”

“Hyan!”

As Tsukiko ran her hand over her buttocks, Kiriko let out a strange, ticklish-sounding cry.

“W-w-w-what are you…!??”

“Are you still hung up on keeping your distance from Seina-chan?”

“W-w-w-well… that’s…” Her anger vanished instantly, and Kiriko’s expression turned girlish.

“Isn't that enough? You’ve atoned enough, and it wasn’t something you should have had to atone for in the first place.”

“……But, but I know what that sin is. I can’t forgive myself… That’s why!” Kiriko covered her face with her hands, looking distressed.

“Then I’ll forgive you.”

“……Huh?”

“I’ve watched Seina-chan for just as many years as you have…” Tsukiko leaned in close, peering at the startled Kiriko. Those eyes were not a mother’s, but a woman’s. They were not filled with compassion, but with a defiant, challenging jealousy.

“Not as a mother, but as a woman just like you, I’ll forgive you.”

And those words echoed quietly through the bathroom, as if they were magic. At that moment, Tsukiko looked exactly like Kiriko, as if they were mirror images of each other.

“Just like me… a woman…”

“That’s right… so please, stop worrying…”

“Stop… worrying?”

It was as if she were under a spell. Kiriko stared intently into Tsukiko’s eyes, repeating her words with a vacant expression, and at those words, Tsukiko slowly nodded.

“!!”

And just like that, the spell of the mirror was broken, and life returned to Kiriko's face.

"Alright, you understand, right? Kiriko."

"……Y-yes… I understand. …I'll try my best."

"Listen…" Tsukiko's temples throbbed at Kiriko's indecisiveness. "Listen, if another girl beats you to him…"

"……If that happens?"

"I won't hold back."

It was a woman's face that sent a shiver down her spine, reminiscent of Gyokuren.

"Whoaaaaa, Mom!?"

"I've reset things with Seina-chan for now, but I can move forward at any time, you know."

Even though she'd reset things and taken a break, that was hardly a major obstacle. Thanks to Kuisu, the flag for the Tsukiko ending was already set.

To Kiriko, who was frozen stiff and sweating like a frog caught in a snake's gaze, "So do your best," Tsukiko leaned in close, her face menacing.

"Y-yes, Mother." Kiriko nodded, her eyes brimming with tears.

"So, what did you think of Kiriko's mother?"

In the Yamada family's guest room, Amane and the others, now changed into their pajamas, were chatting on the futons in whatever poses they pleased, like students on a school trip.

"She's a formidable opponent."

As if she had actually witnessed the events in the bathroom between Kiriko and Tsukiko, Gyokuren cut straight to the heart of the matter the moment she spoke. Her brutally honest remark made everyone burst out laughing.

“Haha… That’s a really fast, straight-to-the-point opinion, thanks. Well, if Gyokuren says so, I’m sure it’s spot on.”

“The way she looks at Seina-san is just like a girl in love, isn’t it? I don’t think there’s any room to doubt that at this point.”

“The question is whether she is a formidable opponent.”

“Ah, I see.”

The question was whether Kiriko could win.

“That’s true, but… what did you think of Seina today?”

“You mean when he was with Tenchi-sama?”

Just remembering that made even Gyokuren’s cheeks flush. And upon seeing that, all the women let out a collective sigh.

“He really does give off that kind of vibe, doesn’t he?”

“Maybe it’s because he was with Tenchi-sama. He just more at ease…”

“At ease, huh... Well, that's not the kind of aura an ordinary guy can project. Tenchi-kun too, for that matter.”

“It’s no wonder he leads that group of women. But what’s amazing is that he’s never intimidating. Have you noticed? The Masaki family is the model for the Galactic Federation.”

At Ryoko’s words, everyone nodded.

“Today’s events made me realize that they’re the same. I think Seina-sama and Tenchi-sama embody the world that Seto-sama and the others desire."

“So that’s why they acknowledge Seina and have high hopes for him… We have a huge responsibility, too.”

“The problem is that Seina-sama and Tsukiko-sama are already a perfect match.”

At Gyokuren’s remark, everyone fell silent. Although there was a visible age difference, in terms of emotional maturity and overall aura, they were well-matched.

“...Ugh, Kuisu-sama is such a handful. She should have just left it alone. She really went and stirred up a hornet’s nest!”

“I suppose she just wanted to do something to help Kiriko-san,” Ringo said thoughtfully.

Considering Seina’s feelings, that was what everyone there was thinking. Or rather, they were getting frustrated with Kiriko’s indecisiveness. It was like all the athletes were standing at the starting line, waiting for the signal to begin, yet one athlete was still wandering around aimlessly. If it were anyone else, they could just ignore it, but when it came to Kiriko,

there was nothing they could do. No matter what they said, everyone there was just too soft-hearted.

“There's bound to be some progress, at least. Maybe by now...”

“Mother and daughter, locked in a fierce struggle…”

At Gyokuren’s words, everyone got goosebumps.

“Ugh! When you say it, it’s no joke!” Karen reflexively smacked Gyokuren on the head.

The moment she did, the eerie aura that had been hanging over the room vanished.

“Well, as for whether they'll team up or go their separate ways... I guess we'll have to wait and see.”

“Heh heh heh. Anyway, we’re going to make her spill the beans no matter what.”

Everyone’s eyes sparkled. In the end, they were all just a bunch of busy bodies.

Seina was sitting alone on the veranda, gazing up at the moon. The moon above Earth, which he hadn't seen in a long time, was beautiful as always. It was especially beautiful in the darkness of the night, in a village devoid of streetlights or building lights.

“...What a beautiful moon.”

Seina looked towards the source of the sound with a start, and saw Kiriko, fresh out of the bath, approaching him while gazing up at the moon.

“Did you think it was Mom, by any chance?”

“Huh!?”

Kiriko’s words hit the nail on the head, and Seina’s heart skipped a beat. Seina’s parents had said they couldn’t tell Kiriko and Tsukiko apart just by their voices, but for Seina, who’d known them for so many years, he could easily tell them apart by their manner of speaking and the nuances in their voices, even without seeing them. But the fact that he mistook Kiriko’s voice for Tsukiko’s was, after all, Kuisu’s fault.

“May I sit next to you?” Her tone was a bit formal because she was feeling a little sulky.

But Seina had no way of knowing that, so he simply said, “Please do,” as curtly as ever, then immediately looked up at the moon

Kiriko had wanted to see him flustered and offering an excuse, but pressing the issue any further would be a bit childish. Kiriko stood silently beside him.

“...It’s strange, isn’t it?” Once the tension had eased, Seina spoke quietly, still staring intently at the moon.

“Just a short while ago, I thought maybe… no, that it might be a place I’d never be able to go in my entire life…”

“Yeah. Now you can go even farther, after all.”

“……Even farther……, huh?”

With a look of longing, Seina gazed at the moon, and through it, at the vast universe.

“I wonder just how far I can go.”

Hearing those words and seeing his profile, Kiriko suddenly felt an indescribable sense of unease. It was like getting lost in an unfamiliar city at night, even though this was supposed to be a time spent with her parents in a home lit by warm lights… A sensation akin to fear, as if she had lost her place in the world.

“……”

Seina’s eyes weren’t on Kiriko now. Seina, who had always followed behind Kiriko, had already been recognized by many people, gained wings to fly freely, and true to his words, was looking ahead, ready to fly as far as he pleased. Tears welled up in Kiriko’s pleading eyes, and her lips moved slightly.

“Just how far can we go?”
Kiriko felt unspeakable distress at those words and face.
“…Don’t leave me.”
Her voice sounded childlike, as if fading away.

“...Don’t leave me.” Her voice sounded childlike, as if fading.

“Huh? Wait, what??”

When Seina turned his head at the sound of her voice, Kiriko was already gone.

“Seina-chan.”

As Seina frantically looked around, Tsukiko, dressed in a yukata, called out to him. For a split second, he wondered if it had been Tsukiko standing there just a moment ago, the timing was so perfect. Seina rubbed his eyes in surprise, and Tsukiko approached him with a smile.

“If you’re not sleepy yet, I’d love for you to join me for a nightcap… What do you say?”

“……Huh? But……”

“Don't you think it would be good to talk about all sorts of things we haven't been able to

talk about before? Things we won't be able to talk about with Kai for quite some time.”

That meant these were conversations he could only have now that he knew about the universe.

“So, you see?”

“……Okay. I understand.”

“There are pajamas in Kai’s room, so go change. You’d be more comfortable in something loose, wouldn’t you?”

“Okay.”

Tsukiko remained where she was, watching Seina head toward Kai’s room.

“If you don’t want to leave Seina-chan and me alone together, you’d better come along too.” Tsukiko said to Kiriko, who was hiding behind a piece of furniture, and then walked out into the living room.

At that moment, Kiriko had hidden because she was embarrassed to have her crying face seen.

“This is for Seina-chan.”

Tsukiko, already flushed and in high spirits, placed a drink in front of Seina. A mixture of syrup made from green plums preserved in rock sugar, diluted with ice and sparkling water. For Tsukiko and Kiriko, it was plum wine mixed with soda.

“...Ah, it tastes just like Auntie's cooking.” Seina said as he took a sip and breathed a sigh of relief. It was especially irresistible in the summer.

“I’m so happy… With Kai it’s nothing but cola and stuff!”

“Kai is still the same as ever, in every way.”

“He’s way too predictable. I thought things might get a little better after Dai left.”

“Does Dai-san come here anymore?”

“I told him not to come here anymore.” Tsukiko said in a dismissive tone.

“Kai’s all grown up now, and he’s past the age where he misses his father. Well, I suppose he misses his wallet, but if he really wants to see him, I’ll be telling him about space in a few years, so he can just wait until then. Anyway, Kai alone is enough of a hassle; I’ve had enough of taking on any more trouble.” Tsukiko downed her drink in one gulp.

“Besides, I don’t want to end up hating my own son.”

Kai had inherited a great deal of Dai's personality, the very traits Tsukiko disliked. If Dai were around, she'd have no choice but to face that side of Kai, whether she liked it or not.

"But once Kai goes into space, I'll be all alone… If that happens, maybe I'll go back to the Academy and study again?"

"What!?" Kiriko cried out

"It's not that surprising, is it? I'm still on leave of absence."

"Really…"

"You didn't know? Once you're enrolled at the Academy, unless you're expelled, you retain your enrollment rights until you voluntarily withdraw or pass away. It's never too late to learn. After all, the Academy's motto is 'Learning until the day you die'."

"That's true. Marriage and raising kids aren't obstacles there. Come to think of it, what was your major, Mom?"

"Aside from the basics, it was AI... research on artificial intelligence."

"Ah, so that's why…"

The reason she met Miki's creator, or rather, her father, Hiroshi, was through her major coursework. However, that fact would remind Seina of Miki's death, so she didn't bring it up any further. Of course, Tsukiko felt the same way.

(Ah, so that's why Aunt Tsukiko and Miki-san's father were there at that time...)

But Seina was thinking about the gazebo by the lake. Miki's death still pained his heart, but the peaceful expression on Miki's father's face back then helped to ease that pain.

"Come to think of it, when you say 'artificial intelligence,' you mean NB, right? If so, I wish I could have brought it here."

"Hmm… Bring him here, huh. So that's what you think, Seina-chan?"

"Huh? But he's kind of… weird, isn't he?"

"Ah, it's fine, people handle their NBs differently. But the golden rule is that how others treat an NB follows how its owner treats it. Of course, even if someone treats it like an object, if the owner treats it as a person, others will follow suit."

"Is that so... I'll keep that in mind. By the way, Auntie Tsukiko, your reaction to my NB is a little strange."

"Strange, huh?" Tsukiko said while looking at Kiriko.

"There were all sorts of issues during the initial startup, and Amane was having fun installing weird plugins and such, so its personality is a bit… well. Though even before that, since it

was made in Airi-sama's workshop, I don't know if that's the cause or if it was just designed that way from the start."

"Did you have Airi-sama take a look at it?"

"I did, sort of… But it came back even stranger."

"Hehe... Yes, that's amazing. But even so, something made in Airi-sama's workshop is beyond my capabilities. It's on a completely different level."

"Oh... I see."

"Oh, your glass is empty."

Just then, Tsukiko noticed that Seina's glass was empty, so she poured some plum juice into it and handed it to him.

"I've got quite a bit of plum syrup left over from last year, so don't be shy. If you'd like, feel free to take some home with you."

"Thank you."

"Stop being so formal." Tsukiko gazed at Seina dreamily, gently moved closer, and leaned against him.

"!!"

The neckline of her yukata gaped wide open, revealing her full breasts and cleavage. A pleasant scent wafted from her flushed skin, the result of the alcohol.

"Whoa, Mom!"

"It's fallen open, hasn't it?" Tsukiko said nonchalantly to Kiriko, who was glaring at her.

"Can I fix that for you?" Moving around to Seina's other side, Kiriko whispered over his head.

"Well, as Seina-chan's aunt, I'm just happy that he came home safely."

"Then why did it turn out like this? This is just like…"

It looked just like the kind of gesture you'd make with a lover.

"Um…"

Seina looked away, looking flustered. That's because Kiriko's chest, as she spoke over his head, was swaying right next to Seina's face. Plus, since he was sandwiched between the two of them, he couldn't move carelessly.

"Geez!"

Kiriko moved away from Seina for a moment, but immediately leaned back against him a bit roughly, as if to stand up to her mother. After all, Kiriko was drunk too.

“But looking at you like this, I can really see how much stronger you’ve become, Seina-chan… Your build is completely different from a year ago.”

“Of course he has. Do you have any idea how many hellish battles Seina-chan has been through? His combat record is so impressive that the average captain couldn’t even hold a candle to him.”

“No… it’s not quite that extreme…”

“It’s true! You’re amazing!” Kiriko snapped at Seina.

“I-I see... But the reason I’m safe and sound like this is thanks to all the people who’ve been supporting me...”

“Support is just support, after all. If Seina-chan, who’s at the center of it all, isn’t solid, it won’t work.” Now it was Tsukiko’s turn to complain.

The conversation had become so tangled that it was impossible to tell whether Tsukiko and Kiriko were arguing, whether Seina was being scolded by both of them, or whether he was actually being praised by both. On top of that, every time the two women spoke, they would wriggle their bodies seductively against him, their cleavage becoming increasingly exposed. On top of that, with both his arms firmly gripped, he couldn’t escape, so Seina was stuck staring straight ahead, unable to move her gaze.

“You’re right, Mom. You’re absolutely right.”

“Huh, is that how it is…?”

“That’s just how it is. Hehe.”

“Ahahahaha. So do your best, boy.”

“……I’ll… do my best.”

“Mm-hmm! Good boy, good boy ♡”

In the end, this torture-like pleasure continued until the two of them passed out drunk and fell asleep.

Chapter Thirteen: Fuku's Great Adventure

Just before dawn the next day. Even in the Masaki household, where everyone was an early riser, everyone was still fast asleep when Fuku suddenly woke up.

“Fumyaa… myaa.”

She frantically looked around, searching for Seina. But when she saw Sasami, Ryo-Ohki, and Aeka still asleep, Fuku remembered that she was at the Masaki household.

It felt lonely to be the only one awake while everyone else was sound asleep. Fuku tried desperately to fall back asleep, but her mind was too alert, and she couldn’t seem to doze off.

“Mii...”

Fuku knew that if she woke up Sasami or Ryo-Ohki, who were sleeping next to her, they would comfort her, but she hesitated to do so. Or rather, Fuku just wanted to see Seina so badly she couldn’t stand it.

Fuku quietly slipped out from under the covers and headed for the door. With her sense of smell, she might be able to track Seina down.

“Fumya… Fumyaa!”

But the sliding door was too heavy for Fuku to move. Unable to use her ability to pass through walls just yet, Fuku had no way of getting out of the room.

“Fumya…”

Just as she felt so lonely she was about to burst into tears, a small gap suddenly appeared in the sliding door right in front of her.

“Mya?”

Looking up, she saw Ryo-Ohki standing there with her hand on the sliding door.

After Ryo-Ohki opened the door for her, Fuku scampered out into the hallway and cried, “Myaa, myaa!” and poured out her heart, expressing how much she wanted to see Seina.

“Mya!” As if to say, “Leave it to me,” Ryo-Ohki gave her chest a light thump, scooped Fuku up, and headed quietly toward the entrance, careful not to wake anyone.

It would be a real hassle if Ryoko, who was sleeping on the living room beam, noticed her. She usually snored loudly after drinking, but sometimes she woke up easily, and if she spotted her while still half-asleep, Ryoko would say, “Come on over here. Keep me company for once.”

And just like that, she’d be drawn in, picked up, and stroked on the head, and she wouldn’t let go. This was a reaction to a previous incident where Ryoko, her maternal instincts

awakened, had smothered Ryo-Ohki with excessive attention and ended up making her resent her. Of course, she now kept physical contact to a moderate level, and Ryo-Ohki didn't mind being held by Ryoko. But right now, her goal was to escape the Masaki household.

Using the stairs by the entrance, Ryo-Ohki quietly made her way down to the first floor. She opened the front door just wide enough to slip through without making a sound and stepped outside.

"...Myaa."

As they breathed in the refreshing, cool morning air outside, Ryo-Ohki and Fuku let out a sigh of relief.

"Myaa…"

Fuku immediately began sniffing the ground, trying to find traces of Seina. Ryo-Ohki picked Fuku up in puzzlement and touched their forehead gems together.

What they discovered was that, because Fuku's main unit was undergoing maintenance, they couldn't access the main data stored there. Furthermore, perhaps due to complications at birth, only a portion of the data accumulated in the main unit had been transferred.

"Myaa."

Just as Ryoko had taught her when she got lost before, Ryo-Ohki pressed her forehead against Fuku's and taught her how to access the main unit's backup data and how to search for her location.

"Myaa! Myaa!"

The data transfer took place in an instant, and Fuku immediately turned toward Masaki Village, where Seina was and leapt out of Ryo-Ohki's arms.

"Myaa!" As if to say, "That's right," Ryo-Ohki nodded vigorously and set off toward Masaki Village.

"Oh my, so early in the morning. Where are the two of you heading, all by yourselves?"

When they reached the gate, Fuku was suddenly addressed and quickly hid behind Ryo-Ohki.

"Well, well, it seems I startled you… I'm terribly sorry. Yes."

"Myaa." Ryo-Ohki meowed to Fuku as if to say, "It's okay," and stroked her.

"We are Azaka and Kamidake, the gatekeepers of the Masaki household. We simply called out to ask where two young children were heading so early in the morning."

The one who spoke to Ryo-Ohki and Fuku was one of Aeka's Guardians, Azaka, who served

as the gatepost of the Masaki family's main gate. At the sound of that gentle voice, Fuku gently lifted her head.

"Myaa, myamya, myaa." Ryo-Ohki explained the situation to Azaka and Kamidake.

Otherwise, they wouldn't open the gate.

"Oh, I see, I see. To meet Fuku-dono's master?"

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!" Fuku also desperately pleaded that she wanted to see Seina.

"Well, well, how unfortunate … how lonely that must be. Under those circumstances, we won't stand in your way. Have a safe journey."

Moved by Ryo-Ohki and Fuku's pleas, Azaka and Kamidake creaked open the gate.

"If anything happens, don't hesitate to call on us."

"Take care~~"

"Myaa!"

With Azaka and Kamidake seeing them off, Ryo-Ohki and Fuku set out from the Masaki residence. On the mountain path, illuminated by the light of the moon hanging high in the sky, the two cast distinct shadows.

"Myaa."

Fuku twitched her ears and wiggled her front paws as she stared at her shadow. Then, with a thud, she landed on the ground and began hopping around, playing with her own shadow.

"Mya?"

Suddenly, Fuku's shadow was swallowed up by a larger one. Looking up, she saw Ryo-Ohki smiling down at her.

"Myamya!"

Fuku dashed out from under Ryo-Ohki's shadow. But Ryo-Ohki's shadow immediately fell over her again.

"Myaa."

"Myaa!"

Ryo-Ohki chased after the still-clumsy Fuku, carefully going easy on her. Fuku gradually got more excited and started squealing with delight.

"Myaa, myaa!"

"Mya! Myamyamyamyaa!"

“Myaa”

The two of them happily continued playing tag for what seemed like forever. But...

“Grrrrr…”

Suddenly, a growl came from behind some bushes, and two glowing eyes were staring at Fuku. Instinctively, Fuku took refuge on Ryo-Ohki’s head.

“Mya!”

Ryo-Ohki braced herself, ready to defend Fuku, and turned toward the source of the growl. The creature behind the growl emerged silently and slowly from the bushes.

“Grrrrr…”

It was a medium-sized mutt. Even though it was medium-sized, it was quite large compared to Ryo-Ohki. It was baring its fangs and growling. But Ryo-Ohki didn’t budge an inch.

“Grrr... Hmph?”

Suddenly, the mutt let down its guard. Then, to Ryo-Ohki’s surprise, it wagged its tail, came right up to her feet, and rolled onto its back, displaying a posture of submission.

“Myaa?”

With Fuku perched on her head, looking puzzled, Ryo-Ohki stroked the dog’s belly.

Actually, some time ago, while Ryo-Ohki was walking alone in the mountains, she came across a pack of stray dogs. They were once pets abandoned by heartless owners who had since gone feral and formed a pack.

The wild dogs attacked Ryo-Ohki when she entered their territory, but they were struck by a mysterious destructive beam (according to Washu) fired from the gem on Ryo-Ohki’s forehead. An attack powerful enough to reshape the mountain. The frightened dogs fled in panic and had obeyed Ryo-Ohki as their leader ever since. And so, the mutt standing before her was one of those dogs.

It soon became clear why the dog had been wary at first. From the shadows where the dog had been hiding moments ago, five puppies, about three months old, emerged, as if following the dog. And right behind them, a female dog with large teats, presumably the mother appeared.

“Myaa, myaa.”

“Wan! Wan!”

It was unknown why the parents had left the pack and emerged from their den with the puppies, but the puppies happily played with Ryo-Ohki. Fuku also let down her guard and joined in the fun.

“Myaa, myaa.”

After playing with the puppies for a while, Ryo-Ohki explained the situation to the male dog. Whether he understood or not, the male dog hid the puppies and the female dog in the bushes again, then began walking in front as if to escort Ryo-Ohki.

“Myaa!”

Saying goodbye to the puppies and the female dog, Ryo-Ohki and Fuku continued their journey to Masaki Village. The journey went smoothly, and they arrived at the village entrance without incident.

“Wan!”

The male dog who had been escorting them barked briefly and stopped there. From this point on was human territory, so the dog would not enter. However, there was no danger beyond that point.

“Myaa!”

Ryo-Ohki thanked the dog and entered the village. The male dog watched them go, then returned to the female dog and their puppies.

“……Mya”

But even after entering the village, Ryo-Ohki remained on high alert, despite being in a safe place. That was because Ryo-Ohki’s natural enemy was here.

Ryo-Ohki’s natural enemy, one capable of scattering even a pack of stray dogs, was the rooster who served as the leader of the chickens kept at Kei’s house. Back when Ryo-Ohki was still a young cabbit, that rooster had wandered into the Masaki household and chased her relentlessly, planting a deep trauma in her young mind.

Looking up at the sky, she could see that dawn was breaking; sunrise was just around the corner. In other words, it was almost time for that guy to be active. Fortunately, she hadn’t heard the rooster crow yet. If they could make it to Tsukiko’s house, where Seina was, before then, she’d be in a safe zone. Ryo-Ohki quickened her pace.

“Myauu!”

Just as she rounded the corner, with Tsukiko’s house just a short distance ahead, she bumped right into it. The male bird was on guard for a split second, but upon realizing it was Ryo-Ohki, he let his guard down.

“Koke!”

Ryo-Ohki felt as though the creature had smirked. Her body froze with fear.

“Myau”

Fuku let out a small, anxious meow. At that very moment, Ryo-Ohki's body surged with strength. Ryo-Ohki wasn't the same as before. Having gained Fuku, someone to protect, she had grown.

"Myao!" Ryo-Ohki assumed a fighting stance and glared at the creature.

"Koke? Kokokoko, koke!" For a moment, the creature was taken aback by Ryo-Ohki's reaction. But immediately, it growled menacingly at Ryo-Ohki.

"Fumyan…"

But the trauma ingrained in her since childhood was not something she could easily overcome. Moreover, the situation wasn't exactly a last stand yet. There was a way to avoid danger and take a different path. There was no need to expose Fuku to danger as well.

Ryo-Ohki slowly began to back away, trying to let the creature pass. Convinced of his victory, the creature smirked and took a step forward as Ryo-Ohki retreated.

But just then—

"Mya! Myamyamyamyamya~~~n!!"

Suddenly, Fuku leaped off Ryo-Ohki and began charging toward the rooster.

"Koke! Kokokokogogogee!!"

For a split second, the rooster was almost overwhelmed by Fuku's intensity, but he quickly regained his composure and growled a warning. Yet Fuku's charge didn't stop. With a beaming smile on her face, Fuku came charging toward him with a madness that bordered on insanity—and now it was the roosters turn to be terrified.

"……Ko……ke, cogeeeee!!

With goosebumps covering his entire body from fear, the rooster flew away as far as he possibly could. Likely the longest distance he had ever flown in his life.

"Myao?"

Ryo-Ohki watched Fuku, who still wouldn't stop, with a puzzled look, but the reason soon became clear.

"Myaa! Myaa! Myaaa~~n!"

Fuku flew straight toward Seina, who was stretching at the entrance.

That's right! The one Fuku charged at wasn't a rooster, it was Seina. He just happened to be in the way. Fuku felt no fear when she saw Seina. It was nothing but the sheer joy of seeing Seina that drove her forward.

"Fumya…"

Seeing Fuku so happy, Ryo-Ohki finally let her guard down, and her eyes welled up with tears.

“So this is where you are.”

As he spoke, Ryo-Ohki was scooped up by a hand reaching out from behind her.

“When I heard from Sasami-chan that Fuku-chan and Ryo-Ohki were missing, I had a feeling… Ryo-Ohki?”

“Myaa~~n”

Perhaps overcome by a sense of relief, Ryo-Ohki couldn’t hold back her tears any longer and clung to Tenchi, bursting into tears.

“Yes, yes… It’s okay now.” Tenchi gently stroked Ryo-Ohki’s back as he walked over toward Seina.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

“Fuku, what on earth is wrong with you... Tenchi-senpai?”

Seina, who had been bewildered by Fuku’s enthusiastic outburst, noticed Tenchi approaching.

“Sorry, Seina-kun, it's just as you see.”

“Ah, I see. So Ryo-Ohki-chan brought Fuku here, didn’t she?”

Seina looked at Ryo-Ohki clinging to Tenchi and understood everything.

“I’m sorry. I took Fuku-chan in, and now this has happened. I’m really sorry.”

“It's okay. Ryo-Ohki-chan was probably just looking out for Fuku, and besides, they're both safe now.”

“I’m glad you say that, but…”

This time everything was fine, but that doesn't mean it will be the same next time. Tenchi felt responsible.

“Ah, it’s okay! I was keeping a close eye on things.”

Just as he thought he’d heard a voice coming from nowhere, Washu, having deactivated her optical camouflage, appeared with a camera in hand.

“Wa, Washu-chan!?”

“Heh heh heh! I've titled it 'A Journey to Find My Master'! Guhuhuhuhu! I got some great video!” Washu flashed a V-sign with a beaming smile.

“I’ll edit it and send it to you later, so look forward to it, okay? ♡”

With that, Washu left Tenchi and the others standing there dumbfounded and skipped off back to the Masaki residence. Tenchi and Seina watched her retreating figure in silence.

“……Um… Well, shall we just call it a day for now?”

“Y-yeah, I guess so. I’ll be more careful next time.”

“Thanks for your hard work. Thanks, Ryo-Ohki-chan.”

“Myaa…”

As Seina stroked her head, Ryo-Ohki looked down, blushing and looking embarrassed. Fuku was also wagging her tail so hard it looked like it might snap off, as if to thank Ryo-Ohki.

“……Well, see you later.”

With that, Tenchi started walking, following after Washu. Just as his figure disappeared from view, Tsukiko poked her head out from the entrance.

“Seina-chan, I thought I heard someone’s voice. Is someone there?”

“Tenchi-senpai just stopped by on some business.”

“Oh?”

Tsukiko noticed Fuku perched on Seina’s shoulder.

“Is that Fuku-chan?”

“Yes, Ryo-Ohki-chan brought her over a little while ago.”

“Oh! Since you didn’t have her with you yesterday, I thought I wouldn’t get to meet her… Come here, Fuku-chan.”

Fuku hesitated slightly as Tsukiko reached out her hand, but perhaps because of Seina’s attitude, and the fact that she really did resemble Kiriko, her curiosity got the better of her. Staring intently at Tsukiko’s face, she slowly placed her paw on the outstretched hand.

“Fumyaa?”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Tsukiko. I'm Kiriko's mother.”

Perhaps the word mother made everything click, because Fuku moved closer to Tsukiko and rubbed her cheek against hers in greeting.

“……Oh, Fuku-chan, you're here?”

Kiriko, carrying a large bag and wearing light makeup, came out of the front door. It seemed she was about to go out.

“Ryo-Ohki-chan said you were feeling lonely, so…”

“Oh, Kiriko, are you leaving already? You should at least have breakfast before you go.”

“The shop’s about to get busy, so I can’t linger. Besides, I’ll probably fill up on the samples anyway.” Kiriko said while stroking Fuku’s chin as she sat on Tsukiko’s shoulder, then, “Well, I’m off then,” She waved and quickly ran off.

“How are you going to get there? Should I drive you?”

“Kasumi-san’s husband is here, so I’m going to get a ride with him.”

Kasumi was Tairō’s mother. Presumably, the husband who drove Tairō and Kasumi here was staying in the village overnight and would give her a ride to the store from there.

“Kiriko enjoys doing it, so don't worry about it. I'll make breakfast right away, so please help me.”

Tsukiko patted Seina on the shoulder as she watched Kiriko’s retreating figure with an apologetic look, then went inside the house with Fuku.

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“Ugh! Mom, I told you to stop messing with my brain and spinal cord!”

Kai, who had lost consciousness last night, finally woke up in the morning. Well, it wasn’t as if he’d been unconscious the whole time; after a while, he’d just been sleeping normally. However, his head seemed to hurt a little from the heel drop he’d taken, and he was eating breakfast while complaining to Tsukiko.

“It’s because you say such stupid things.”

It wasn’t as if Tsukiko had been aiming for a vital spot from the start. Things had escalated to that point as a result of their long-standing battles and Kai’s growing resilience. Anyway, whenever Kai looked like he was about to do something troublesome, it was less of a hassle to knock him out beforehand than to clean up the mess afterward. Tsukiko was holding back, after all.

“Anyway, Seina, when are we going to your place? I’m ready whenever you are!”

“You really don’t listen to a word I say, do you?!” Tsukiko glared at Kai with a fierce expression.

“Hey, Kai. Because of my position, I can’t introduce you to those people. So if you want to go, you’ll have to go on your own. Either way, I can’t go near the shop.”

Because of his position as captain, Seina couldn’t possibly force Amane and the others to give preferential treatment.

“W-well, then my perks are...”

“That’s exactly why Seina-chan is telling you it’s impossible! Stop thinking about such nonsense and help out around the house for once!”

“Then let’s go out somewhere and have some fun. We finally got to see each other after so long, after all.”

“Come to think of it, I promised to go to Tenchi-senpai’s house. Which would you rather do: help Aunt Tsukiko or help Tenchi-senpai?”

“You’ve always been on Mom’s side, haven’t you…? Hey, Shorty.” With that, Kai suddenly grabbed Fuku’s front paw. “Your owner is heartless! He won’t even listen to a request from his best friend…”

“Myaa?” Fuku didn’t seem surprised by the sudden turn of events; she just stared intently at Kai’s face.

“I see, I see. Seina, this little girl wants to meet those stunningly beautiful ladies too, right?!”

The next moment, Kai collapsed to the ground, his expression unchanged. Of course, it was thanks to Tsukiko’s neck chop.

“Two more years until Kai turns eighteen… I’m not confident I won’t kill this child before then.” Her cheeks flushed, Tsukiko made a truly ominous remark.

“A-Aunt Tsukiko?”

“I’m just kidding. Even though he’s my own son, I do find him a bit of a handful, but this time… Well, after seeing such beauties up close, I suppose it can’t be helped…”

Tsukiko picked up Fuku, who was peering down at the fallen Kai, and stroked her head. Fuku’s warmth, soft fur, and adorable appearance helped calm her agitated mood.

“I see. I understand why Kai ended up like that. My friends at the Academy are the same way.”

But Seina himself, who was closer than anyone else, seemed completely unfazed.

“Don’t you feel weird about it, Seina-chan?”

“Huh!? It’d be a lie to say I don’t feel that way… But it’d be rude to think that way about people who go through so much trouble for someone like me.”

“……I see.”

Tsukiko felt a little sorry for Amane and the others. Even though that would be a perfectly clear way to express her feelings to an ordinary person, Seina, the one who mattered the most, had absolutely no concept of being liked by someone else, so a half-hearted expression of interest won’t get through to him at all. Of course, for her daughter Kiriko, that was a welcome development that bought her some time. But as long as she had to express herself as directly and clearly as Tsukiko had last night, Kiriko was bound to struggle,

even if she were to take the initiative.

(Even so, the one I feel the most sorry for is Seina-chan…)

As Tsukiko imagined it, if Seina were to make a move, every single woman she met last night would surely accept him.

(I'm certainly not Kuisu-sama, but I can't help but want to meddle.)

Tsukiko fervently hoped that Seina's trauma would be resolved as soon as possible.

At Super Yamada, Kiriko and the other girls were formally introduced during the morning meeting.

After Hokuto's opening remarks, as Kiriko and the others took the stage one by one, sighs and murmurs rose from the employees, both men and women alike. The male employees expressed admiration and high expectations, while the female employees felt a mix of resignation bordering on jealousy, envy, and anger toward the giddy male employees. Amane and Gyokuren, in particular, possessed an overwhelming beauty that left no room for anyone to even think of competing with them. Even for Kiriko and the rest, it was nearly impossible to find any area where they could claim even the slightest advantage. The only things that offered the female employees any consolation regarding the male employees were the fact that this was only a short-term assignment and that the women were simply too far out of their league.

"Seriously! This is no joke! Just look at the smirks on the guys' faces!"

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Aiko, a 24-year-old female employee, was venting to her colleague Ikue, 22, and Umeko, a 51-year-old part-time worker she was close with.

"But hey, it can't be helped… Even from our perspective as women, they're seriously beautiful, you know?"

"That's right, jealousy is really unseemly."

Umeko, the older woman, looked on with a smile at Aiko's anger and Ikue's resignation. To Umeko, the two were like daughters.

"I'm not that full of myself, you know! It's those guys I'm mad at!"

"Well, it's just a matter of holding out for a few days. Like the boss said, it's just a short-term gig. Besides, just between us, the day before yesterday, when I was helping the boss's wife prepare for the welcome party..." Umeko looked around and suddenly began speaking in a low voice. "Apparently, every single one of them has special feelings for the president's son."

"W-Wait, really!?"

“The president’s wife was all giddy about it. I can’t say for sure, but it definitely feels like she’s not exactly averse to that, you know?”

“Wow… that kid, huh?”

“If that’s the case, those guys really have it coming, don’t they?” Aiko’s mood brightened instantly.

“But if that’s the case, maybe the president’s son isn’t so bad either.”

“Hey! Wait a minute, you!”

“Aiko, are you serious??”

“W-what? He’s the president’s son, so if he seems nice, I might go for him… Just a little. I just thought about it for a second. Besides, he’s probably still in high school, right?” Surprised by Ikue and Umeko’s shocked reactions, Aiko stammered out an excuse.

“Oh, right. You’re from out of town, aren’t you…? Well, I’ll give you some advice then. Just stay away from that kid.”

“Exactly! He’s seriously dangerous. He’s got the worst luck ever. If you’re not careful, it could even be life-threatening. It’s practically a curse.”

“A-a curse? Life-threatening??” Aiko was taken aback by the two women’s unusually serious expressions, which she had never seen before.

“Just so there’s no misunderstanding, he’s actually a really nice guy. He’s just incredibly unlucky. He’s always covered in injuries, and he gets serious ones that land him in the hospital several times a year. He even drags other people into it.”

“That’s why, you know, people around here absolutely avoid getting close to him.”

“This shop was just a small general store a year ago, but as soon as that guy left home, it grew incredibly quickly and became this big.”

“W-what are you talking about... Seriously?”

“It’s totally true. I’m dead serious!”

Ume nodded seriously at Ikue’s words.

“That’s exactly it. I can totally understand why the president’s wife is so happy. It's such a joy to go out and find a place and people who welcome you outside of your family.”

“When you think about it that way, those people are really amazing, aren't they?”

“And their skills are top-notch, too. Just look at the faces of those temporary employees. Hah… Even at this morning’s meeting, most of them were absent, weren’t they?”

“I really feel so much better now. Those guys were looking down on us, and it made me feel

so sick."

"So, that's why you should give up on marrying into wealth. Either way, Yoshiko-chan is the heir to this shop."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Come on, it's time. Back to work!"

Dragging Aiko, who was desperately denying it, Umeko led her out of the restroom.

Chapter Fourteen: Omens

Thud! The captain of a certain ship, a certain squadron, and a certain flagship slammed his fist down on the console with such force it looked like he was trying to smash it to pieces.

"This is, this is ridiculous! I won't stand for this!"

He could not accept the scene displayed before his eyes.

×××

"Hey… what does 'a certain captain of a certain squadron on a certain flagship of a certain military force' mean?"

Enclosed by a secret wall in the Chairman's office, Airi and Mikami were looking at a report.

"Ho ho ho. They launched an unauthorized sortie under the guise of training and, by sheer luck, encountered the target. Not only did they squander a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but the entire fleet was wiped out."

Well, that "certain" notation is, so to speak, a form of "samurai mercy."

"I see... So, in the end, the enemy got away unscathed?"

"Yes."

"...Well, it is a bit of an abnormal situation, isn't it? Going so far as to expose the military's shame just to try and bring Seina-kun back." Airi frowned, baring her fangs in displeasure. Veins were clearly visible on her temples.

"Oh my, is that what you call abnormal? We're certainly receiving damage reports from every department across the board. It's as if they're deliberately trying to make the situation seem bigger than it needs to be."

"What I really hate is this attitude of trying to dump work on us at the drop of a hat. For starters, Seina-kun is still a student! And he just reunited with his parents after a year apart. How can they possibly call him back?"

“And Kamidake is still in maintenance, too.”

“Exactly! Who do you think you are, telling Washu-sama to ‘hurry up and get it done’? If you think you can do something that terrifying, go ahead and try!”

It seemed that was the main reason. Well, Airi had a point.

“It would be nice if we could just announce Washu-sama’s existence to the world, heh heh heh.”

It was complete madness. Those involved would be feeling utterly horrified. If the people who were criticizing Airi found out the truth, they'd immediately request that their reports be rejected and returned, and once they'd been returned, they'd quickly destroy them and never submit them again.

That said, Airi was a Philosopher herself, and when it came to being a pain in the neck, she was every bit as bad as Washu.

“For now, let’s identify the mastermind and give them a good dose of harassment. I’ll make sure they can’t go on vacation for ten years!”

“You’ll just end up being disliked again.”

“Do you think I could do my job as a Philosopher if I was afraid of being disliked?!”

Well, that was a fair point. The Philosophy Department was the department responsible for considering the ethical use of inventions and discoveries, their complex applications, and patent allocation. In other words, it was like a group that skimmed off the top of what scholars earned. The only problem was that the Philosophy Department was made up of extraordinary geniuses.

Naja, for instance, used to engage in truly elaborate acts of harassment against complaining scholars: she would develop something with performance and functionality far superior to their own creations, then present them with a report that dissected the original product’s flaws down to the finest detail, hammering home the fact that “what you developed is really only worth this much.”

“That said... it is also true that in the battle against that fleet, the rate of indirect hull damage caused by a combination of defects, poor maintenance, and accidents was abnormally high, far exceeding the damage caused by direct attacks.”

“And then there are the human errors too... Yes, yes, I know. That this is clearly due to a skew in the odds. That’s exactly why I want to keep Kamidake in top condition. And gather as much intelligence as possible on enemy fleets, too. We can’t just go in cold every single time, can we?”

“True. I’d like those people to do a little more work, too.”

“I wonder if they even realize that their very existence is at stake.”

There was no point in keeping anyone on in that department who couldn't handle the work expected of them. Whether it was the employer or the client, those footing the bill always demanded a higher standard. The sense of getting good value for money was a very important factor.

"Well then… let's remind them of that."

When it came to Seina, Mikami was just as harsh. Her face was cheerful, but her eyes were so cold that even Airi felt a chill run down her spine.

"Airi-dono's taking her frustrations out on everyone… Well, it's nothing new, really. It's like, 'What's the big deal now?'" Washu laughed heartily while communicating with Seto.

"Well, you see. The commander of our First Sentinel Fleet is just the same."

"Oh? Didn't Seto-dono assassinate the First Sentinel Fleet Commander?"

The Commander of the First Sentinel Fleet was a beautiful woman who wore mourning clothes to symbolize her vow, as a widow, never to marry another man. And because she wore mourning clothes, no one knew her face or background, but thanks to her competence and demure demeanor, she enjoyed overwhelming popularity even on Jurai.

However, after she suddenly stopped appearing in public, a rumor began to spread with convincing plausibility that she had been assassinated by Seto, who was jealous of her popularity.

"Heh… So, when will the maintenance on Kamidake be finished?" Seto smiled and ignored Washu's question.

"Hmm. So, Kamiki Seto Jurai-dono, you wish to pit the Kamidake against that fleet?"

"We've suffered casualties as well, so I'd like to take them out before things escalate."

"True… If this is the same as Seina-dono, I can understand why you'd think it'd be troublesome to leave it alone. After all, you know better than anyone just how useful Seina-dono is… But even so, what's the reason you're coming out here yourself?"

"Is 'I feel sorry for Airi-chan' not a good enough reason?"

"Hahahahaha~~!" Caught off guard, Washu burst out laughing.

"I saw the results of Daidoros' analysis. It looks like this is going to be quite a hassle, doesn't it?"

"Hmm. The Shank Guild is the one that created the ship that took down that third-generation vessel, right? In that case… that means they could probably make a replica of Ryoko's gemstone."

“Erasing my own memories has come back to haunt me. I’m pretty sure I requested an analysis of that jewel a long, long time ago, didn’t I?”

That was nearly twenty thousand years ago, before Washu even came to the Imperial Academy.

“I thought I’d destroyed the data thoroughly… Still, between that junk from Ringo-dono’s time and this, you sure have a knack for finding such things. Well, since it’s a shoddy replica, it’s no problem for us…”

“If we were to use it on a general-purpose ship, it wouldn't be that simple. It's currently the best energy source available for general use. That's where Daidoros's overwhelming power comes from.”

“So you want to crush them before that probability bias is technically incorporated?”

“Even if they can’t match the psychic abilities of the current Kamidake and Seina, the fact that mass production is possible makes it a threat, no doubt about it.”

“Hmm… Kamidake’s maintenance should be finished by tomorrow morning.”

“Oh my, that’s quite thorough. Then again, for us, Kamidake’s data is like a treasure trove, so I can understand the sentiment. In that case, we’ll need to give this some thought as well.”

“Oh my, are you thinking of incorporating a Royal Tree? That’s scary.”

“Oh, wasn’t that part of the plan for Kamidake from the start? I seem to recall you saying that it was a ‘different concept from Ryo-Ohki’.”

“If we’re going to integrate them, a first generation tree would be ideal, but we’d at least want second generation.”

“That’s one thing we can’t control… or maybe we can…”

Normally, a contract with the Royal Trees required the tree’s consent. However…

“I’ll leave that part to you. It’s a rare opportunity, after all. We want to do everything we can on our end.” Washu happily ended the call.

“Oh, where’s Ringo-san?” Aiko quietly asked a colleague from accounting when she noticed that Ringo wasn’t among her colleagues.

During lunch break, the administrative staff were eating in the break room. While the store staff took breaks in shifts, the administrative staff didn’t have to deal with customers, so they could take their breaks on time.

“She said she doesn’t have time for lunch, so she’s eating at her desk. She really is a hard

worker."

"Yeah. She's handling almost that entire workload by herself, so I guess it can't be helped… but still." Aiko frowned slightly.

"What's wrong?"

"It just feels like we're not doing any work… Oh! I went too far. Forget I said that, please."

"It's not that we aren't working—it's just that Ringo-san is amazing. Actually…" The accounting employee glanced around, confirmed that the temporary employees were not present, and then lowered her voice and said, "Actually, I overheard the temporary employees talking, and it seems Ringo-san is seriously super capable."

"You can tell just by looking at her."

"No, no. It's not that they're comparing her to us. They're saying things like, 'Why on earth would someone like that come to a place like this?' or 'I've never even seen anyone like that in the accounting department of a major corporation,' or 'Wasn't she in a national-level department?' And to top it all off, they're even saying, 'I wish she'd come work for our company.'"

"It's not just a matter of them throwing in the towel. She's just that amazing."

The entire Accounting Department felt a sense of deep satisfaction at the way Ringo had bested the team sent from headquarters.

"You really start to wonder if she's a machine. After all, she finished double-checking work that took us weeks in just one day…"

"And didn't she find nearly a hundred mistakes, too?"

"Her typing speed is so fast it's hard to believe, and she's already finished the mental math by the time she's typing it in."

In other words, the calculations in Ringo's head were far faster than the physical speed of typing into the computer.

"Ringo-san has a scary level of intensity while she's working, but once she's done, she's really adorable, isn't she?"

Everyone present nodded with warm, fond expressions. After all, the women of the Tatsuki family of the Imperial Family were considered the 'number one choice for a bride'. Even on Jurai.

"I can understand why the men get so excited…"

"I suppose so… Well, I'll be off then." Aiko stood up as if she'd made up her mind and wrapped her half-eaten bento box in a cloth.

“Oh, but lunch isn’t over yet!”

“Hmm... I'm trying to lose a little weight. So, sorry.”

“Worried about your belly fat now?” Her colleague remembered their promise to go to the beach together once the financial statements were finalized.

“It’s just a mood thing. See you later.”

Aiko raised her hand in apology and left the break room. She headed straight for the kitchenette. After making some tea to break the ice, she headed to the office where Ringo was.

In the empty office, the only sound was Ringo typing on the keyboard at an extraordinary speed.

“Ringo-san. Would you like some tea?” Aiko had been intimidated by the sheer speed of her typing, but she steeled herself and said.

“Thank you. Since you went out of your way to make me tea, I assume you have something you’d like to ask me?” Ringo paused her typing at a natural break and smiled at Aiko.

Seeing Ringo up close, Aiko’s face turned bright red. Just like everyone who interacts with Ringo, she was completely charmed by her loveliness.

“Um, well… actually, I was hoping to ask you about the president’s son… that is…”

“Oh my, are you interested in Seina-sama?”

“Um… actually, I moved here from out of town for this job, so I don’t really know much about the president’s son. I heard he’s an unlucky boy, but my friend said he’s in the ‘Cursed Class’…”

“I see, so that’s why…”

“...I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s not a bad thing for you to learn the truth about him.”

“I did hear that he’s actually a very good boy, though…”

“We refer to it as a probability bias, but I can certainly understand why your friend would call it a curse. However, even if we say he’s unlucky, it’s definitely not the result of Seina-sama doing anything wrong.”

“It is certainly a pity that he’s disliked because of that. But…”

If he dragged others into his bad luck, it was only natural that people would avoid him.

“Yes, I don’t think I can blame those people either. Seina-sama’s probability bias is that dangerous.”

“Ringo-san, what do you think of the president’s son?”

“I like him, of course.” Ringo flashed a perfect smile and said it point-blank.

“Wow, you really said it!”

“To be honest, I don’t know if it’s romantic love. But I can say with certainty that I have deep respect for him.”

“Deep respect, you say…”

“His probability bias affects every aspect of his daily life. According to video analysis of his detailed daily activities, there are thousands of instances each day that appear to be influenced by his probability bias, and dozens of instances that could be life-threatening. For an ordinary person, the probability of either occurring is only one in several thousand, so you can imagine just how significant those numbers are, can’t you?”

“W-What? Seriously? How can he even survive like that?”

“He unconsciously avoids the vast majority of them. Only a few cases slip through and manifest as concrete phenomena.”

“Avoids them unconsciously... That’s amazing, too.”

“Since it’s been that way from the moment he was born, it must have become second nature. That’s why Seina-sama’s probability bias is at a level where growing up normally would be incredibly difficult. Of course, that applies to his mental health as well.”

“If it were me, I might have committed suicide…”

“But Seina-sama possesses a very healthy mind. That's a really amazing thing.”

“T-true… But I think Ringo-san is amazing, too. After all, you can say with such conviction that you respect and admire someone with such terrible luck, without being afraid.”

“It’s precisely because there are several others like me. If I were alone, I’m sure I’d be crushed.”

“By 'other people,' do you mean Kiriko-san and the others?”

“Yes. They are the ones chosen to support Seina-sama in both his public and private life.”

Ringo answered Aiko’s questions as honestly as she could, as long as it didn’t cause any problems. Beating around the bush led to misunderstandings and wasted time.

“Both professionally and personally, you say?”

“Yes. Both professionally and personally. I’d be happy if you could become one of them too.”

“W-what, me…?”

“The more people there are to support Seina-sama, the better. It takes a great many people to help carry the heavy burden he bears.”

“……Huh, I see. But I… I don’t think I’m ready to make that kind of commitment.”

For Aiko, it was, after all, nothing more than a passing interest born of a little jealousy. It was only natural that she would shy away from the level of commitment Ringo and the others had shown. Still, it was true that she had been moved by their sincerity and felt ashamed of her own half-hearted, curiosity-driven feelings.

“Is that so? That’s a real shame.”

“W-wait, when you say 'both professionally and personally,' does that mean... um... that all of you, Kiriko-san and the others, feel that way about the president’s son?”

She meant, “Do you like him as a man?” Ringo responded to that question with a silent smile.

“Heh, are you satisfied now?”

“Yes, yes, of course! I’m sorry for asking you this.”

“I enjoyed talking with you as well. Thank you.”

“Hahaha, the pleasure was all mine. I hope things work out with the president’s son.”

Aiko cleared away the tea and moved away from Ringo. Just then, perhaps signaling the end of lunch break, the office staff returned.

Chapter Fifteen: Tenchi's Melancholy

After finishing lunch at Tsukiko’s house, Seina took Fuku and headed to Tenchi’s house. Having heard from Sasami that Tenchi had gone out to the fields, Seina went straight there to help him.

“Tenchi-senpai, are you alone today?”

“Meow!” Ryo-Ohki raised her hand to let them know she was there.

“That’s right. So it’s just you and Ryo-chan?”

“Thanks to everyone helping out yesterday, I’ll have it easy for a while.” Tenchi said without stopping his work.

Although every now and then, he glanced over at Seina as if worried about him, then let out a sigh.

“?? Senpai, is something wrong?” Seina noticed his demeanor and asked Tenchi.

“Ah… no, well… It just feels kind of weird having nothing to do.”

“Come to think of it, yesterday there were carrots planted as far as the eye could see, weren’t there?”

“It would take us a long time to harvest them all by ourselves. By the way, what did you talk about with Aunt Tsukiko yesterday?”

“Huh!? W-what do you mean?”

“Aunt Tsukiko’s been acting a little strange lately. It’s like… she’s been worrying about something…”

“S-she said that Kai has started to look more like Dai-san.”

Even though it was Tenchi, he couldn’t exactly say, “It’s about my relationship with Tsukiko.”

“Oh, now that you mention it… you might be right. It seems like Aunt Tsukiko and Dai-san went through a lot together.”

“Have you heard anything about Dai-san? Like, what exactly happened between him and Aunt Tsukiko back in the day…?”

Seina knew nothing about Tsukiko’s past. At most, he knew that Tsukiko had apparently been at the Academy a long time ago and that she had known Miki’s father.

“Ugh… hmm… I’m not sure if I should be the one to bring this up…”

“Well, that’s true… But every time Kai says something weird, she knocks him out with a neck chop or a heel drop, so I’m a little curious. I’m worried I might say or ask something careless and step on a weird landmine… No, I’m definitely going to step on one…”

If Kai ended up going to space in the future, contact with Dai would be unavoidable. In that case, it was necessary to know at least some of the background.

“I-I see… Hey, could you please not say you heard this from me?”

“Of course! I definitely won’t!”

“...I don’t know all the details myself, but after Kiriko-san’s father and Tsukiko-san’s husband passed away, she got to know Dai-san. Apparently, he wasn’t like that back then. He was more serious and just a regular person... or so I’ve heard.”

“Ha ha ha! Senpai, you shouldn’t lie.” Seina, unusually skeptical of Tenchi’s words, stated firmly.

“I said the same thing when I heard it. But if that weren’t the case, it wouldn’t make sense, would it? They aren’t married, but Kai-kun is there, after all.”

So, at least back then, they must have had some kind of relationship.

“Well, sure, there are cases where people have been deceived or forced into it…”

“I suppose so… But Dai-san isn’t the type to deceive people, is he? He’s not the least bit good at playing mind games, and besides, Tsukiko-san is clearly stronger than him. Besides, if he’d done something like that, there’s no way Dai-san would be able to come see Kai.”

On the contrary, if he’d done something like that, Dai would’ve been killed by Tsukiko, or at best, he’d be in prison. Tsukiko wasn’t the type to just take it lying down, and more importantly, there was no way she would’ve given birth to Kai.

“Back then, Dai-san was apparently going through a lot of personal troubles and was really struggling. According to people who heard about it, under normal circumstances, it would have been enough to drive him to a nervous breakdown or even suicide.”

“……So, because he was dealing with problems serious enough to lead to a nervous breakdown or suicide, he seemed normal?”

“A serious young man who was genuinely kind and encouraging to Tsukiko-san when she was going through a tough time… Well, that would explain it, wouldn’t it?”

“It’s true that Dai-san’s appearance is actually surprisingly right up Tsukiko-san’s alley… Of course, as you said, I think she was swayed by the situation.”

“And then, one day, once those worries were suddenly resolved, Dai-san went full throttle…”

“Full throttle, huh? That’s… tough. Way too tough.”

If a serious, quiet young man turned into a frivolous, goofy person the very next day, you’d seriously think he’d hit his head or was sick. It was like a cute kitten turning into a cockroach.

“According to the person who told me this, it was like a scam. Of course, Tsukiko-san had fallen for him at one point, and since he’s Kai-kun’s father, she tried her best to accept it, but…”

“There’s no way that’s possible!”

Tsukiko and Dai, even Seina, as a child, thought they were a strange match. Even her son, Kai, agreed with Seina.

“Or maybe Mom was possessed by something back then.” That was how seriously Kai put it.

“Come to think of it, Seina-kun… do you happen to know the Tennan family?”

“Yes, of course I know them.”

“I heard that Dai-san is part of that family.”

“Ugh!…… I-I get it now.”

It was a family subject to a law as absurd as the “Tennan Special Provision.” Judging by how much Amane despised them, Tsukiko was actually being quite patient.

“I heard that anyone at the Academy would know what you're talking about if you mentioned that name... Are they really that famous?”

“There’s someone from the Tennan family at my school too… and there were all sorts of things. Oh, if you ask Amane-san… actually, you’d better not. She’ll get really upset. She might even hit you…”

It was extremely rare for the cheerful and easygoing Amane to get like that.

“Yeah. I kind of get it now. Well, just looking at Dai-san, I can pretty much guess what’s going on.”

“But I’m glad I asked. Thank you, Senpai.”

So far, he hadn’t run into Dai in space, but who knew what would happen in the future. If Kai went into space, the chances of that happening went up. He didn’t dislike Dai, but honestly, he’d rather avoid having more contact with the Tennan family than necessary. Seiryo alone was pain enough; if others started popping up like dominoes, it wouldn’t be funny.

“Meow!” Just then, Ryo-Ohki spotted Sasami in the distance and raised her hand. She picked up Fuku and ran off to greet her.

“We haven’t done much yet, but maybe we should take a break.”

Tenchi set the hoe he was holding down on the embankment and started walking toward a spot in the shade of a tree, the perfect place to take a break.

After finishing dinner and taking a bath, Tenchi and Seina left Fuku in the care of Ryo-Ohki and Sasami and headed to Tenchi’s room on the third floor. It was still too early to go to sleep, but they made their beds and relaxed in comfortable pajamas.

“...Tenchi-senpai, isn't there something you wanted to talk to me about?” The conversation between the two faltered, and after a brief silence, Seina suddenly asked.

“W-Why do you ask? Ah… no… well…” Tenchi looked down, looking flustered. It seemed he was hesitating about whether to bring it up.

“It sounds like something you’re having trouble saying. …Could it be about me?”

“Why do you think that?”

Seina was good at reading the atmosphere in situations like this. Of course, that only applied to bad things or awkward situations; he was completely clueless when it came to good things or feelings of affection.

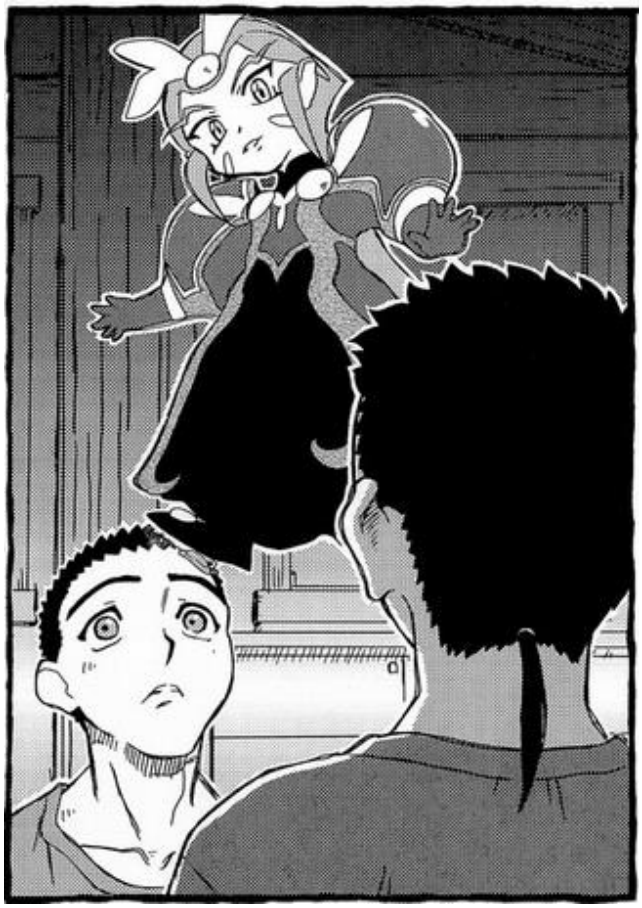
“Tenchi-senpai… You have the same look on your face as you did when Aunt Kiyone passed away. You look sad and distressed…”

“!!……I see. So that’s the look I have on my face.” Tenchi looked up and met Seina’s gaze. His expression was calm, yet resolute. He decided that he, too, should steel himself. And he felt grateful for Seina’s thoughtfulness.

“So, will you listen to me?”

Seina nodded quietly at Tenchi’s question. It was a heavy nod, unique to Seina, filled with the resolve to accept everything.

“...Tokimi-san, are you there?”



Tenchi spoke into the empty space, as if talking to himself. Before Seina’s eyes, who was puzzled by Tenchi’s sudden words, a doll-like girl, about three-heads tall, appeared.

“I exist in all dimensions, space, and time. Have you forgotten? Masaki Tenchi.”

“……Um, what is this……?”

Even Seina wasn’t surprised by this anymore. It seemed to be a physical presence rather than an image, but if anything, he was bewildered by the appearance, which didn’t quite match Tenchi’s serious demeanor.

“Actually, she is…”

“Hold on a moment, Masaki Tenchi. When discussing matters like this, we need a proper setting.” Cutting Tenchi off, Tokimi raised her hand high.

Just then, “Whoa!?”

From beneath Seina's feet, the universe unfolded, instantly covering the entire sky. Having undergone Bio-Enhancement, Seina possessed a strong resistance to hypnosis and drugs. His senses told him this wasn't a hallucination. No, even before that...

——This is real!

Seina’s honed instincts screamed it. His sense of danger, sharpened by statistical anomalies,

was judging this state to be abnormal.

“Good, good. So you’ve sensed that this is the real thing.”

Tokimi’s voice reached his ears. But it wasn’t the voice of the child from earlier; it was the voice of a mature adult. Moreover, it echoed like ripples across the entire sky, making it impossible to pinpoint the source. But when he looked up in the direction of the presence…

“Eek!”

There, as if covering the entire sky, stood an adult-sized Tokimi of infinite magnitude, looking down at Seina with an air of calm superiority. What he felt from that presence was not a mere emotion like awe or fear. It was something that could be called dread and despair, arising from instinct, from the very source of life.

“Ugh! ……Guh”

Seina held onto his consciousness as it threatened to be swallowed by the abyss, unconsciously swallowing the scream that threatened to escape him. It was a scream that even Z couldn’t stop. Yet Seina had stopped it unconsciously. Of course, that was no small feat. It felt as though his reason and consciousness were barely held together by a thin, spider-like thread. Sweat poured from his entire body; just the mere act of seeing Tokimi up close had left him utterly exhausted.

Seina took a deep breath and slowly began to regain his composure.

(Oh, I’m soaked in sweat. I’ll have to take another bath…!)

Realizing he was thinking such a silly thing, Seina felt his mind calm down instantly, as if by magic.

“Hmm, I see.” Tokimi looked at Seina and smiled with satisfaction.

“Masaki Tenchi. You may tell him everything. This one possesses a strong spirit capable of bearing it.”

“Um... before we get into that, what's going on here...?”

Judging by appearances, it was outer space. But the sense of scale is just too immense.

“This Yamada Seina, is just as you're thinking, this is the three-dimensional universe where you all exist. Right in front of you is your galaxy.”

“Huh!?”

A galaxy about thirty centimeters in diameter floated right in front of Seina.

“Whoa!” Seina stiffened his body to avoid touching it, holding his breath so he wouldn’t move a muscle.

“The atoms that make up your body won’t collide with the stars in the galaxy. Relax.”

“E-even if you say that…!”

Suddenly, the galaxy moved away from Seina, or rather, Seina moved from that spot, and in the distance, a massive galaxy cluster glowed like a bubble. If this were real outer space, just in that instant, he must have traveled billions of light-years… It was completely insane.

“I thought it would be easier to understand with a point of reference. In other words, that size represents the current size of Masaki Tenchi’s existence.”

“Existence? Size?”

“Exactly what it means. Just as it looks.”

At Tokimi’s words, Seina looked over at Tenchi.

“Seina-kun. When we raced to the shrine, what did you think of me?”

“Well… I just thought, ‘Oh, so you’ve had Bio-Enhancement too…’”

“Do you know what this is?”

Three thin, membrane-like objects appeared in front of Tenchi.

“What is this?”

“Have you ever heard of Light Hawk Wings?”

“Those are the ones Imperial Ships create, right? Wait, is this one of them!? Are you creating this, Senpai??”

Right before Seina’s eyes, who was staring intently, Tenchi transformed them into a sword, a shield, and armor.

“This is material transformation of Light Hawk Wings. Aside from us, only Masaki Tenchi can perform it. It’s a technique even the first generation of Royal Trees couldn’t manage.”

“I think I finally understand what you mean by ‘the magnitude of one’s existence’……!”

Seina looked up at Tokimi and saw what looked like two figures behind her. He was curious about what they were, but there was something he needed to ask first.

“Who exactly are you, Tokimi-san? Is it your fault that Senpai ended up like this?”

“That’s right. We are known as ‘The Three Gods of Creation.’ Written as ‘God of the Summit.’ As the name implies, we are beings that stand at the pinnacle of every dimension that exists.”

“The… Gods…”

"'God of the Summit' is merely a title. Though we possess omniscient and omnipotent power, we are simply higher-dimension lifeforms. There is no need for honorifics or worship."

"I-I see."

He didn't know how to react when an omniscient and omnipotent being was described as just another living creature. He decided not to think about it any further.

"I see something that looks like human figures behind you."

"It would be better to explain why Tenchi became this kind of being."

——When discussing matters like this, a suitable setting is necessary.

(……Oh!)

It was only then that Seina understood the meaning of Tokimi's words.

(I see. It's precisely because of this situation that I was able to believe that Tokimi-san is a Divine Being and that Tenchi-senpai has become an extraordinary entity.)

If he'd been talking to Tokimi, who looked like a three-head tall doll, in Tenchi's room, he probably wouldn't have been able to believe it right away, even if he'd heard it from Tenchi himself.

(Though I did go through quite a lot just for that…)

He wiped the sweat dripping from his forehead with his hand, then wiped it again on the hem of his pajamas.

"As the name 'The Three Gods of Creation' implies, we are three deities by your standards. One exists in this three-dimensional world as Hakubi Washu, and the other as Tsunami, the progenitor of the Royal Trees."

"I understand about the progenitor of the Royal Trees, but Washu-san is a Supreme God?"

"She left her power as a Supreme God behind me, existing only as a shadow. In this three-dimensional world, only a fraction of her power remains. So why did she do such a thing? That, precisely, is the reason for our existence."

"Reason for existence... Do you mean purpose?"

"From the very moment we came into existence, we possessed omniscient and omnipotent power. However, we also harbored a contradiction. It is the trauma of knowing that a dimension exists above the Supreme Dimension in which we reside. For our omniscience and omnipotence negate the existence of that dimension."

"Existence and negation… is that the trauma? But why did that happen?"

“To investigate this, we spent an infinite amount of time endlessly repeating trial and error. It was the kind of thinking Sister Washu refers to as 'contemplative thinking’. But that failed to uncover any flaws in our omniscience and omnipotence. So next, we spent an infinite amount of time endlessly engaging in practical experimentation. But the result was the same.”

“That’s mind-boggling… I feel like I’m going to get dizzy.”

The sheer scale of it is too much for his mind to grasp. It felt like he’d suddenly been placed atop a towering spire with no safety rope.

“So we created a lower dimension and established a ‘liberation line’ between it and the Supreme Dimension. ‘Liberation’ is essentially the same concept found in religions. Normally, those who reach that point lose their abilities and are reduced to nothingness. But if there were someone who could break through that and reach the Supreme Dimension…”

“Could that be a clue to finding what lies beyond the highest dimension?”

“That’s right. But when we arrived at that conclusion, an unprecedented change occurred within us. We were originally a trinity, but Sister Washu relinquished her power and memories as a Supreme God and, as a mere human, began seeking knowledge from scratch to see if she could find any contradictions. Sister Tsunami descended into the third dimension with all her power and sought new possibilities through the inheritance of her bloodline. And I, as originally planned, disrupted all preordained harmony, created irregularities, and sought those possibilities.”

“And the result of that is Tenchi-senpai?”

“There was one other, a person named Z.”

“You said was, does that mean he’s no longer with us?”

“He lost his humanity because of that. That’s why he couldn’t forgive anyone who shared his potential. He sought to become the sole absolute being and fought Masaki Tenchi, but was defeated. And as for Masaki Tenchi, that battle accelerated his metamorphosis. …Do you remember, Masaki Tenchi? The time you were cut down by Z?”

“Huh? Yeah... I think I was shielding Ryoko... but after that, all I remember is intense pain and someone speaking to me...”

Tenchi desperately tried to recall that moment, searching his memory. But he couldn’t remember anything beyond that; the only thing he could recall was the intense pain he felt at that time.

“Being cut by Z caused a connection to the higher dimension. The Light Hawk Wings were converted into matter to form cells and build a body, and the metamorphosis into a being of the next dimension began. However, since the metamorphosis, which should have been triggered by spiritual maturity, was forcibly activated, we had no choice but to forcibly

suppress Masaki Tenchi's metamorphosis. That was the cause of your pain."

The pressure involved was of a magnitude that could easily trigger an explosion capable of shattering the universe.

"Is it dangerous if he doesn't achieve spiritual maturity?"

"Yamada Seina. What do you think of this situation? What did you think when you saw me in this form?"

"I… I think I sort of get it."

As Seina recalled that sensation, he was overcome by a feeling that left him covered in goosebumps. Even thinking about it now, cold sweat broke out all over his body. At that moment, Tenchi's expression twisted just like Seina's.

"I just synchronized with your memories, Yamada Seina. Now you should have a rough idea of what it feels like to reach the higher dimension, right?"

"Eh… y-yes, I suppose so… but why did I suddenly feel relieved after that, when someone spoke to me?"

"Our experiments generate a great deal of distortion. As a result, there are those who have become singularities as a reaction to this. That being is another manifestation of Sister Tsunami in the third dimension, Sasami's mother. Although she is currently stable, in 100,000 years, she will suddenly lose her mental balance and begin to run amok."

"Misaki-san!?"

"In a hundred thousand years??"

Seina and Tenchi exclaimed in unison.

"She exists across all dimensions and all timelines. Though, the Misaki of 100,000 years from now is merely one possibility of what she might become."

"……Senpai, do you understand?"

"Don't ask me…"

The two were already struggling just to grasp the scale of time. Their minds simply couldn't keep up with anything beyond that.

"The future is determined by the conscious and unconscious choices and actions of many beings. But on timelines beyond that, many possibilities remain undetermined, descending into chaos… To put it in terms you can understand, it's like the 18+ choice-based adventure game Masaki Kai has."

"Huh??"

Seina and Tenchi's minds nearly went blank, but for a different reason.

"Uh, that was pretty blunt. It feels incredibly jarring for an all-knowing, all-powerful god to bring up an erotic game."

"Yamada Seina. I merely selected the most appropriate information to convey."

After all, Tokimi was all-knowing and all-powerful. To her, there was no distinction between vulgar and noble information.

"So, basically, the ending changes depending on the choices, but there are other endings within the game… is that about right?"

"That is correct. Misaki, 100,000 years in the future, turned hostile toward us and attacked. At the same time, the Masaki Tenchi who exists as a possibility on the same timeline, came to stop her. It was that same person who saved Masaki Tenchi just as he was about to undergo metamorphosis."

"So, Tenchi-senpai from 100,000 years in the future saved the current Tenchi-senpai?"

"He was merely a possible version of Masaki Tenchi. He was nothing more than a temporary phenomenon caused by jumping to that point in the timeline alongside Noike, who is Kagato's other half. After all, that future hasn't been set in stone yet."

"So, in the end, the metamorphosis stopped, and he's settled as the current Senpai?"

"His growth continues, though."

Even now, Masaki Tenchi's existential growth continued.

"What happened to the person known as Z?"

"That one was defeated by Masaki Tenchi and ceased to exist... but I restored him, and he is now living on his home planet with his parents, just as he wished. As an ordinary human." Tokimi looked somewhat sad as she spoke.

Seina hesitated, unsure if he should continue the conversation, but decided that his questions should be resolved now.

"Um… does that mean he'll attack again…?"

"He can no longer use his power. We cannot create beings with potential. That is precisely why we conduct these experiments. …Hey, Masaki Tenchi, do you resent us?"

"Huh!?"

At Tokimi's sudden words, Seina looked at Tenchi, who remained silent with his head bowed.

"We are the cause of all your suffering. But…"

“More than that! More than that, right now… I resent my own weakness. Ryoko and the others… and… and!” Tenchi’s face twisted in agony as he cut off Tokimi’s words.

“I’m sorry! I’ve dragged you… into an infinite prison!”

“An infinite prison!? That’s quite… a dramatic way of putting it. If you don’t mind, could you explain what you mean?” Seina’s voice remained calm, as if he were the older one.

“...After this ability manifested, I had Washu-chan examine me. But she found absolutely no physical abnormalities or changes. However... however... my body had become ageless.”

“Immortal? Did your body become indestructible? Well, I suppose it’s not that surprising, given that you’ve already reached a stage where your existence is larger than the galaxy itself…”

“It’s not immortality, Yamada Seina—it’s agelessness. If you could destroy Masaki Tenchi’s current existential magnitude in an instant, it would be possible to kill him.”

“Wait! Is there actually someone who can do that!? That’s practically the same as being immortal!”

Destruction on a cosmic scale spanning millions of light-years didn’t seem like something a human could accomplish.

“There are plenty of high-dimensional lifeforms capable of it. Even the first-generation Royal Trees could do it, and in the future, Yamada Seina’s Kamidake might… and so could the beings Yamada Seina is likely to encounter in the future.”

“???

“Of course, we would never tolerate any act that harms Masaki Tenchi.”

“...So, that means he really is immortal, doesn’t it?”

It was impossible for anyone to do something that the all-knowing, all-powerful Supreme Gods would not permit.

“Seina-kun, you don’t understand the gravity of this situation! You're also immortal!” Perhaps Seina’s usual demeanor was getting on his nerves, because Tenchi raised his voice, something he rarely did.

“Me too?”

“……Sorry for acting like that… But, but I…”

“I’ll take it from here.”

“No, I… I have to be the one to say it.” Tenchi took a slow, deep breath, steadying his nerves.

“My immortality, you see, is apparently absolute. Even the Supreme Gods like Tokimi-san are said to experience slight deterioration. But even if this universe ceases to exist, even if Tokimi-san and the others are gone, I will continue to live on forever. Even if everything around me turns to nothingness, I will remain here.”

To exist within nothingness… what on earth would that state be like? All Tenchi felt was a sheer, inexplicable terror.

“So that’s what you mean by an ‘infinite prison’…”

“Seina-kun, what do you think of Bio-Enhancement? What do you think of having a lifespan of two thousand years?”

“……I did realize I’m no longer like an Earthling… but I figured it’s just normal in space. Or rather, if everyone around me is like that, I probably wouldn’t mind it much.”

“I feel the same way. Even this Infinite Prison… I thought I could endure it if I wasn’t alone. But I never imagined…”

“No way... what is it?”

“My power is keeping everyone from aging. Ryoko, Aeka-san, Sasami-chan, Noike-san, Mihoshi-san, Ryo-Ohki, Washu-chan. Everyone around me, and even Seina-kun!” Tenchi managed to say with a trembling voice

“The reason I’m ageless is because of Senpai’s power…”

“I know an apology isn’t enough, but all I can do is say I’m sorry. I’m sorry! I’m really, truly sorry…”

That anguished confession was a confession of guilt. It was the heaviest confession of guilt in the world.

“Infinity, huh… Yeah! That sounds interesting in its own way.”

“Seina-kun?” Tenchi couldn’t hide his surprise at Seina’s reaction. No, he couldn’t understand it.

“An 'infinite prison'... If I hadn't met Kiriko-san and Tenchi-senpai, I think that's what the place I was in would have been like.”

“Ah!”

“Of course, it’s not literally infinite, but I understand exactly how you feel, Senpai. The terror of being all alone in a place like that, and the desire for someone to save you. So, just as you did for me, I don’t mind going beyond infinity with you.” Seina looked straight ahead and spoke words as heavy as Tenchi’s confession.

“Seina... I'm so happy to hear how you feel... but with Tokimi's help, you can escape from that prison.”

Tenchi desperately held back the urge to cling to him. But he was so happy, so happy, that inside, Tenchi was sobbing uncontrollably.

“Then what about you, Tenchi-senpai?!”

“I have no intention of squandering the potential I was born with. That goes for both Washu-nee and Tokimi-nee as well. If you call that cruel, then you’re right. You can hate me all you want.”

“Hate you… I couldn’t do that.”

Tokimi and the others, too, had lived through infinite time solely to create this possibility. Having witnessed Tokimi’s anguish when she was rejected by Z and lost him, Tenchi simply couldn’t bring himself to blame her.

“Then let’s go. To the end of infinity! I’m sure we can endure it together.” Seina said this with absolute conviction.

“Yamada Seina has a strong heart. He can endure even infinite time. Besides, there is hope beyond the edge of infinity.”

“Hope!?”

“Masaki Tenchi. Do you remember what Ryoko said when we first gathered at the Masaki residence?”

“……Couldn’t the existence of Tokimi-san and the others be just an experiment by those from an even higher dimension? …That’s right.”

“Beings from a higher plane? I see! It’s just like the experiment involving Tokimi-san and the others!”

“As long as there is a contradiction within us, we cannot rule out that possibility.”

But Tokimi didn’t truly accept that conclusion in her heart. Their omniscience and omnipotence denied it. Yet it was none other than her encounter with Tenchi and the others that gave her the flexibility to even voice that possibility.

“If this is an experiment by those from a higher dimension, then perhaps Masaki Tenchi could become an ordinary human there. Of course, it might just be a repetition of the same thing, but at least he would be freed from our bondage and allowed to accept the disappearance of possibilities.”

Tokimi and the others’ goal was to create a being capable of ascending to the highest dimension. If Tenchi reached that place, their role would be over. There would be no need to protect him anymore.

“Beyond the edge of infinity… that sounds pretty amazing. Tokimi-san, you’ve spent an infinite amount of time there, haven’t you? What’s it like to live an infinite life?” Seina asked Tokimi in a rather carefree manner, as if they were just making small talk.

“It went by in the blink of an eye.”

“That’s quite an impression in itself.”

“For a mayfly born in the morning and dying in the evening, the years Yamada Seina has lived so far are nearly infinite. And a mayfly does not perceive its own lifespan as short. Therefore, one who lives for eternity would not consider it long either.”

“I often hear people say that because life is short and death exists, that’s why people live so hard. What happens to that feeling?”

“That's a cynical view of human nature. In the end, it's nothing more than an excuse for laziness. Some people waste their time, even if it's short, while others spend it meaningfully, even if it's endless... In short, it all depends on the individual's will. Masaki Tenchi. The mind is an infinite world. So there's no need to fear it. Especially since you have someone who’s sworn to walk alongside you... Though I'm not in a position to say that.”

“……Seina-kun…… Are you really sure? Will you go with me to the edge of infinity?” Tenchi looked at Seina pleadingly. He had made up his mind to accept Seina's resolve.

“Yes, of course. It’s kind of exciting, isn’t it?”

“Exciting?”

“To be able to witness the end of the universe… to be able to go on forever. It’s like a dream.”

Of course, even Seina didn’t have absolute confidence. He didn’t know what would happen when the time came, but even so, at least for now, he felt no anxiety whatsoever.

“……You’re strong.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Senpai.”

“I see... If you say so.” Tenchi closed his eyes, accepted everything, and smiled.

““Myaa!””

Suddenly, Tenchi and Seina were snapped back to reality by the meows of Ryo-Ohki and Fuku. The outer space that should have been there vanished, and they were back in Tenchi’s room.

“Ryo-Ohki? Fuku-chan?”

Ryo-Ohki clung to Tenchi, while Fuku clung to Seina, wagging her tail.

“They both want to say goodnight to Tenchi-nii-chan and Seina-nii-chan.”

“Sasami-chan!? …And Washu-chan too!”

At the entrance to Tenchi’s room, a beaming Sasami and Washu, leaning against a pillar,

were looking at them. But once Washu confirmed that Tenchi had recognized her, she gave a quick wave and brusquely hurried downstairs.

“Myaa!”

Seeing Ryo-Ohki and Fuku acting all cute, smiles naturally spread across Tenchi and Seina’s faces.

“Good night.”

Tenchi and Seina said this to their respective partners. Ryo-Ohki and Fuku moved contentedly toward Sasami and perched themselves on her shoulders. Before they knew it, the three-head tall Tokimi was also sitting cross-legged on top of Sasami’s head.

“Good night, Tenchi-nii-chan, Seina-nii-chan.” Sasami bounded out of the room.

“...Thank you, Sasami-chan.” Tenchi called out to Sasami’s back, as if to stop her.

“I’m the one who should be telling you thank you.” Sasami peeked out from behind the pillar, gave a shy smile, and then bounded down the stairs.

Chapter Sixteen: The Masaki Families Nostalgia

“Now then, Kiriko, you’re going to spill everything.”

In the Yamada family’s parlor, Amane and the others sat surrounding Kiriko on the futons laid out on the floor, as if they were holding an impeachment trial. But despite that atmosphere, they were all dressed casually in pajamas, looking just like students on a school trip.

“Amane-san… isn’t this a bit too intense?” Ringo, clearly not used to Amane and the others’ style, looked uncomfortable.

“Hey, Kiriko! You’d better spill the beans while Ringo-sama is still being nice to you.”

Before she knew it, the impeachment trial had turned into a new-comer check-in by the prison boss.

“Amane-san, you’re really hyped up today, aren’t you?”

“It was packed today with customers who’d heard the rumors, and there was this particularly persistent group from another prefecture, so I’m still riding the momentum from fending them off.”

“There were people from other prefectures?”

“Their way of speaking was different.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hey, you there! Take this more seriously!” Amane pointed at the women, excluding Kiriko and Ringo, who had gathered in a corner and started whispering, and shouted at them angrily.

Hakuren and the others quickly returned to their positions.

“……Well, I’ve made up my mind, so I’ll tell you everything……”

“Heh heh heh, you're well prepared, Kiriko. Now, tell me about this slippery, tangled mess you and your mother have.”

“Whoa, are we a pair of perverts?!”

“Hey, Gyokuren was the one who said it first!”

Even Amane seemed to come to her senses upon seeing Kiriko’s angry face.

“Oh, Amane-sama, that’s mean. I didn’t say that in front of Kiriko-sama, you know.”

×××

“……I see. So you’re saying your mother took pity on you.”

“I’m sorry!”

“It doesn’t seem like the situation has improved much, does it?”

“No wonder they call Gyokuren a formidable foe…”

“She made her intentions clear while still holding onto a good position, after all.”

“...So, what are we going to do, Kiriko?” Amane, who had been averting her gaze until then, stared intently at Kiriko.

“W-what do you mean, ‘what are we going to do’?”

“I’m talking about Seina! You know how she feels, don’t you?”

“I k-know… but… well… Seina-chan is still a minor…”

“Not that again!”

Not just Amane, but everyone glared at Kiriko at once.

“But there’s still time…”

Seina hadn’t explicitly expressed his feelings to Kiriko, and in fact, it was unclear just how much Seina cared for Kiriko. Was it as a woman? As a sister? Or was it just admiration? It was unclear what stage he was at. To begin with, it wasn’t even clear if Seina intended to

confess his feelings at all.

Seina had always had a hard time accepting other people's affection. Or rather, he was afraid that if someone liked him, they'd get dragged into unhappiness because of it. So even if Kiriko were to confess, there was no telling whether Seina would accept it. Well, either way, Seina was still a minor. It was still problematic for Kiriko, who was an adult, to make such a declaration.

"But Kiriko-sama. To put it another way, it's as if she's declaring, 'If you keep dithering, I'll just take him myself.'"

"Exactly!"

"W-well, that's…"

——If another woman beats you to him... I won't hold back.

She kept quiet so that the others wouldn't get any strange ideas, but Tsukiko had made it very clear to her.

(Phew, I'm glad I didn't say anything…)

If Amane and the others found out about that, they'd jump right into action.

"Kiriko-san, Tsukiko-san managed to evade the situation this time, but there's no guarantee that Seto-sama or Kuisu-sama will behave themselves."

"And then there's Airi-sama and Mikami-sama, too. Besides, plenty of factions will keep popping up who want to get their hands on Seina."

"The best way to recruit them is through a honey trap, after all." Gyokuren said, exuding a rather unsavory allure.

"When Gyokuren says it, it's just too convincing... Is that really okay, Kiriko? Leaving it to Gyokuren is the surest countermeasure, but it also guarantees you'll become a wreck."

"How rude! I wouldn't do that to Seina-sama... But... maybe that wouldn't be so bad, hehe... Ouch!"

"I told you to stop it!" Unable to withstand the allure emanating from Gyokuren any longer, Karen smacked Gyokuren on the head.

With that, the atmosphere around them instantly returned to normal.

"I'm starting to feel like I should focus on educating Seina rather than dealing with Kiriko…" Amane finally clutched her head in despair.

After all, Kiriko was strangely timid, and Seina was using his minor status as an excuse to hesitate. But to those trying to lure Seina in, none of that mattered. On the contrary, a honey trap during such a sensitive time would be incredibly effective. Kiriko's abilities as a

watchdog were quite high, but her shyness toward Seina could easily create a security vulnerability, and above all, Seina was just unlucky.

“We really ought to start thinking about some way to suppress sexual activity.”

“Oh, I actually asked him before if he’d like me to be his personal companion.”

“Whaaaaaat!?”

“It was Elma at the time, but the topic came up in connection with NB’s ‘Friendship Folder,’ so I said that”, Ryoko said nonchalantly to Kiriko, who was glaring at her.

“I’m pretty sure Seto-sama also mentioned something about leaving his training to one of the senior ladies…”

“Ugh!”

Ringo’s follow-up remark made the furrow between Kiriko’s brows deepen.

“If you’re that upset, just do something about it already.”

“That’s a completely different matter!”

“Seina-san is at that age, you know. Due to his probability bias, he seems to have a bit of a strong tolerance, or rather, a sense of resignation, towards women, but isn’t that exactly why you could say he has absolutely no immunity?”

At Ryoko’s words, everyone’s gaze turned to Kiriko.

“Whoa! …Me!?”

“Actually, I get the feeling Kiriko-san’s mother would be the best candidate…”

At Ryoko’s words, Gyokuren nodded as well.

“W-well…!?”

Kiriko wore an expression of anguish, torn between wanting to accept it and not wanting to, but that was suddenly interrupted by the sound of an emergency call ringing out.

“Hello, this is Masaki Kiriko…”

Kiriko listened to the transmission in silence for a moment, but her expression suddenly hardened before returning to her usual composure.

“Airi-sama has issued an order to return. The deadline is 1200 on 0809.”

“That's quite sudden. If we have to be there in three days, we'll have to leave tomorrow.”

“The order only specifies the arrival time. If we use Kamidake’s advanced hyperspace navigation, we’ll have plenty of time to make it if we leave the morning after tomorrow.”

“Then we have a day’s leeway.”

“I don’t need to return, so please leave the remaining tasks to me.”

“Thank you, Ringo-sama.”

Kiriko and the others quickly put away the futons, pulled out a desk, and began preparing for tomorrow. This involved making prepared dishes and bento boxes, as well as creating manuals regarding the shop’s management policies.

“How about contacting Seina?”

“Tomorrow morning will be fine. The captain doesn’t have any preparations to make, and since Tenchi-kun’s family gets up early, he’s probably already asleep.”

As long as it didn’t involve romantic entanglements with Seina, Kiriko was a truly capable woman. Watching her move with such efficiency, Amane and the others let out a small sigh.

Just then, Mihoshi’s ship, Yukinojo, was in lunar orbit, detaching the patrol unit it had been towing.

“Thanks for your hard work!”

“Well then, I’ll come pick you up again in a week.”

“Ah! Are you leaving already?”

The ones talking to Mihoshi were Seina’s classmates, Kenneth and Rajau.

“Bye-bye!”

Mihoshi waved goodbye to the two, who looked reluctant to part, and ended the call.

“Aaah, Onee-samaaa!”

Kenneth lunged at the fading communication screen and, carrying that momentum, clung to the window overlooking Earth. But Mihoshi’s ship was already out of sight.

“Beautiful lady~~~… If you’re going to do this, at least stop by here~~~…”

“Kenneth-kun. Don’t you think it’s time to give up? You’ve been asking her out the whole trip, and she hasn’t paid you any attention at all.”

“Come on… A chance to get to know such a beautiful lady doesn’t come along very often. And she’s the daughter of the Kuramitsu family, too.”

“It really was like ‘pushing against a door that won’t open,’ though. Anyway, what would you like for dinner?” As usual, Rajau was remarkably matter-of-fact.

“...What do you mean, ‘What’ll you have?’ There’s only the daily special.”

“We’re the ones who picked the menu, so don’t you have any preferences? Like, ‘I want to eat this today’ or something?”

In a place like this, meals were one of the biggest pleasures. That’s why, before departure, you could choose meals for the duration of your mission, plus a few extras, from a list. Of course, there were restrictions regarding nutritional balance and such, but within those parameters, you could specify the main dish, side dish, and dessert for every single meal. If that was too much trouble, your personal preferences were stored in the system, so you could have the system automatically select meals at random.

“Kenneth-kun, you chose everything yourself, didn't you?”

“Even so, I could only choose from the GP-designated menu! My beloved junk food isn’t even on there! And out here on this remote, undeveloped planet, I can’t exactly go out and have fun on my days off…”

“Haha! I never thought our application for a posting to Earth would actually be accepted.”

“...I was half joking, though.”

“I suppose they took into account that we’re Seina-kun’s teammates. So, that planet is the legendary Earth, huh?” Rajau gazed at the sight of Earth.

It was a specially protected planet that ordinary people could never see.

“I guess I can’t even go sightseeing. Ugh, what am I supposed to look forward to for the next week?”

“We can still connect to the internet via hyperspace communication, so there’s plenty of entertainment.”

“I’m not some shut-in NEET—that kind of stuff won’t let me burn off all this youthful energy!”

Kenneth made gestures, rubbing his hands and rocking his hips back and forth, that he wouldn’t dare do in public. Items intended for sexual gratification were restricted for minors. At the very least, if Kenneth’s collection were found, it would be confiscated immediately.

“I’m considered a minor at the Academy, too. But some of our assignment locations are like remote penal colonies where you have to spend a whole year. Compared to that, this is way better.”

“This place is pretty much the same!”

“Heh heh… That’s not true. Do you want to intercept Earth’s radio signals? You can even watch early-stage digital TV.”

“We’re only here for a week. There’s no point in watching a series…”

“What are you talking about? With the broadcasts here, you can even watch shows that are usually protected.”

That meant they could watch age-restricted programs. Adult content wasn’t really affected by the level of filming technology, like CG. As long as they were the same humanoid type, the act itself was the same.

“Plus, at this close range, it’s plenty good enough to see what’s happening on the ground, and best of all, there’s no visual protection, so you can peek to your heart’s content!”

With space technology, it was easy to see every detail of humans on Earth from the Moon’s orbit. It was simple to reconstruct images from acoustic vibrations, so it was possible to visualize even what was happening inside buildings.

“Whoa!”

In other words, they could spy on anyone, anytime, anywhere, to their heart’s content. Kenneth and Rajau looked at each other and grinned.

“Come on, Kenneth-kun! Let’s stock up on plenty of nutrients and get ready for tonight!”

“You're right, Rajau-kun... Alright! I spent three sleepless nights deciding on this, it's a special menu chosen with all my heart. Go ahead and pick something at random and bring it over!”

“Haha!”

Kenneth and Rajau prepared their meal in high spirits, like middle schoolers who’d just gotten their hands on their first adult magazine. After they finished eating, they waited restlessly for their shift to end.

“Hey, Rajau. Isn't that clock broken?”

“Ha ha ha! Kenneth-kun, the Earth isn’t going anywhere.”

“But the perfect peeping spot might just run away!”

“Kenneth-kun, there are over six billion people living there. There are plenty of perfect spots. Besides, our mission here has only just begun.”

“Hmph… You’re right. How could I have been so short-sighted…?”

It’s true that Earth wasn’t protected by any kind of shield or barrier. But it wasn’t until about two hours later that the elated crew realized the equipment needed to observe it was, in fact, protected.

“I can't wait for my shift to end...”

Well, the tragedy for the two of them wasn't limited to the despair they felt two hours later. It was unthinkable to leave two Academy students in training alone. Naturally, the two of them were under the watchful eye of their instructors while on duty, and their smug, embarrassing expressions and conversation from just now were thoroughly recorded in the official logs. Well, since the instructors watching them had gone through similar experiences during their own student days, it was a silver lining that they were watching over them warmly without issuing any warnings.

In the Masaki household, as dawn broke and light began to appear, Seina stretched and opened his eyes.

"Hmm… hmmmm… hmm???"

But there was something distinctly off. It felt like the futon had clung to him after he'd tossed and turned restlessly in his sleep, but it was clearly the sensation of skin… and it was plump, like a rubber ball…

"Ugh! Waaaaaah!"

Seina's scream echoed through Tenchi's room.

"What?! What's wrong, Seina... hmm??"

Tenchi jumped out of bed and froze when he saw Seina being used as a body pillow by Mihoshi, who was completely naked. Blushing at the sight of Mihoshi, who boasted the most voluptuous figure among the women in the Masaki household, Tenchi quickly looked away and ran toward the door.

"S-senpai, help me! …Wait, senpai!?"

Ignoring Seina's pleas for help, Tenchi dashed out of the room.

"Senpai~~!"

His cries for help fell on deaf ears as Tenchi's footsteps faded down the stairs. But he was actually going to call for the most suitable helper for this situation, one he couldn't handle on his own.

After a short pause, Noike burst into the room with light, quick steps.

“Mihoshiiii!!”

In a rare outburst of anger for the usually calm Noike, she let out a roar and landed a merciless punch on Mihoshi’s temple.

Thud! With a deep, rumbling vibration that reverberated right down to Seina’s gut, Mihoshi’s arms loosened slightly. In the blink of an eye, Noike loosened Mihoshi’s limbs and tore her away from Seina.

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“I’m s-so s-sorry~”

Mihoshi, now dressed in the underwear and clothing that had been scattered all over the hallway, knelt before Seina and apologized in a pitiful voice. Seina covering himself with a blanket, watched Mihoshi, while feeling flustered by her breasts, which were about to spill out of her tank top.

“Seriously, you… How did this even happen?”

Noike, standing tall beside Mihoshi, looked down at her with the expression of a teacher scolding a mischievous student.

“Um… well… after I dropped off the students from the training session last night, I came back here… Ryoko-san told me Seina-kun was here, so since your mother has been so kind to me, I thought I should come say hello…”

“Seina-san. This is going to take a while, but please bear with me.”

“Of course.”

If it meant buying him some time for the physiological urge in his groin to subside, then a long talk was just fine!

To sum it up, before going to greet Seina, she decided to take a bath and get ready, so she started undressing. Just then, the light in Tenchi’s room switched from a fluorescent bulb to a small nightlight. Realizing this wasn’t good, she panicked and grabbed her clothes, trying to make her way to Tenchi’s room. She tripped over things along the way and dropped her clothes, but she finally made it to Tenchi’s room, only to find the two of them already asleep. She was debating whether to wake them up when she remembered her mother telling her how nice Seina’s buzz cut felt. She gave it a little touch, and sure enough, the texture was nice and scratchy. She got so absorbed in stroking it that before she knew it, she started dozing off. So, she just lay down with and fell asleep. That’s the story. It was a long tale, about thirty minutes, but thanks to that, Seina was now all set.

“You really are something else, aren’t you? Now, go apologize to Seina-san again.”

“I’m sooo sorry!”

“It’s fine. Well, how should I put it…? I’m used to it from Mitoto-san.”

“Hehe. You’re right.” Even Noike, who had been angry, burst out laughing at Seina’s words.

“Still, Noike-san, you were a bit hard on Mihoshi-san, weren’t you?”

“Y-yeah, that’s true. Actually, Mihoshi and I joined the force at the same time, and back when I was a GP Class 2 detective, before I became Seto-sama’s adopted daughter, we used to work as a team. That’s why I tend to be a bit harsh with her.”

“I see… that must have been tough.”

“For both of us.”

Mihoshi and Mitoto, both caught up in the troubles of a difficult parent-child relationship, instantly understood each other's struggles. If they were two men, they would have exchanged a firm handshake as a sign of friendship.

“Well, let’s head downstairs, I’ll get breakfast ready.”

Noike quickly took the futon Seina had used and carried it out to the balcony to air it out, then went downstairs with Tenchi and Mihoshi.

“Noike-san… I’ve heard about Mihoshi-san’s mother, but does she really look that much like Mihoshi-san?”

“Yes, Tenchi-sama. It’s almost as if she’s a carbon copy. Or rather, she has that same vibe as Kiriko-san and Tsukiko-san.”

“...I see.”

Seina, who had been listening to Noike and Tenchi’s conversation, nodded in agreement at Noike’s spot-on analogy as they went downstairs.

“Oh my~. It’s Seina-chan!”

At that moment, Seina looked up at the familiar voice to find Mitoto, the subject of the rumors, standing right in front of him.

“Mi-Mitoto-san!?”

He was truly speechless at this encounter. Of course, he knew Mitoto was elusive, but he never expected her to show up at the Masaki household on Earth. Seizing the moment while Seina stood frozen in shock at her sudden appearance, Mitoto quickly hugged him and began stroking his buzz cut with apparent pleasure.

“Ah, it’s Mom!”

“Mihoshi-chan, it’s been a while!”

Mitoto, still holding Seina, embraced Mihoshi who had come to hug her. Sandwiched

between the voluptuous breasts of the two women with their stunning figures, Seina flailed his arms and legs, but gradually began to struggle for breath and convulse.

“Look, Seina-dono is in trouble!”

Washu, standing nearby, apparently unable to stand by any longer, forcibly pulled Seina free. Rescued with a squelching sound, Seina gasped for air, filling his lungs to the brim with oxygen.

“Um, why is Mitoto-sama here?” Noike asked Washu as she rushed over to Seina in a panic and began rubbing his back.

“She was hanging around my lab, so I brought her here.”

“Could it be… she was cleaning?” Noike noticed that Washu was holding a broom behind her back.

“Well, sort of.”

Mitoto gently reached out toward the broom Washu was holding with a wry smile. But just as her hand was about to touch it, Washu quickly moved the broom out of the way.

“My broom~~~”

“Here, hold this instead.”

Washu grabbed Seina’s hand and flung him toward Mitoto, as if to tear him away from Noike.

“My broom~~~”

Even as she said this with tears in her eyes, Mitoto held Seina tightly and stroked his head. She was soothing the sadness of having her broom taken away with Seina’s crew cut.

“Is that person Mihoshi-san’s mother…? I see, they do look alike, but what do you mean by ‘while cleaning’ and ‘broom’?” Tenchi, who had been watching from a short distance away as the sudden events unfolded, finally judged the situation safe and slowly approached Noike.

“When Mitoto-sama gets absorbed in cleaning, she seems to wander off anywhere, sometimes she’s even been found dozens of light-years away. We have absolutely no idea how or why this happens, and even if we lock her up, she disappears before we know it, so we have no choice but to take her broom away.”

“……Well, I guess that’s just typical of Mihoshi-san’s mother.”

It was an incredibly far-fetched fact, but given Mihoshi's usual behavior, it wasn’t entirely impossible. That prior knowledge made Noike's words more believable.

“Ahh, no!”

Noike remembered she'd left Sasami in charge of preparing breakfast and hurried to the kitchen. Just then, Seina, who was being held by Mitoto, received a call from Kiriko.

"Ah, hello, this is Seina… Yes, yes." Seina listened while nodding along for a while, then hung up a few minutes later.

"An order to return from Airi-dono?"

"Huh? How did you know that?"

It wasn't just Seina who was surprised by Washu's words, Tenchi was too. Tenchi hurried into the kitchen and began discussing something with Noike.

"I told them that maintenance on Kamidake would be finished this morning, so I figured you'd probably be called back."

"Is that so… So, were there any problems with the Kamidake?"

"Thanks to you, Seina-dono, we were able to collect a lot of valuable data. We've already incorporated all the improvements from that. Operational efficiency has gone up by about fifteen percent, so high-level hyperspace navigation is smoother than before. As for the rest…"

"Ah! Regarding high-level hyperspace navigation… that's not supposed to be public knowledge yet, is it?"

"Oh? Are you curious about the 'dilemma of the philosopher? Well, it's like the measles, something every beginner goes through." Washu glanced at Fuku, who was watching the kitchen preparing breakfast.

"As for that, no one has a clear answer. Or rather, the answer lies within each of us. Who to help and who to abandon… Those standards vary from person to person. Well, do as you please. If you need someone to clean up the mess, I'll handle it."

"So, in the end, that's the only option, is it?"

"Well, because of that, the people I decide to abandon might suffer or even die, but that's not something you need to worry about." Washu casually said something outrageous.

In other words, the number of people affected would depend entirely on Seina's actions.

"I'll… I'll exercise restraint."

"Always ask yourself questions and make sure you come up with an answer. Don't worry if the answer is different every time. The situation is different every time. Even if it's the same formula, the answer will change if the numbers you plug in… are different. Habit is the scariest thing of all… Well, I suppose you know that better than anyone."

"Understood. Thank you for the advice."

“Also, I’ve installed equipment on Kamidake for future data collection, so I’ll be monitoring it constantly from here. Is that okay with you? Of course, I’ll respect your privacy.”

“Yes. Please do.”

If any abnormalities could be addressed immediately, then such an offer would be greatly appreciated for Fuku's sake.

“One more thing... Oh, right. I threw in some stuff we don’t need here anymore but might be useful to you, so take a look if you feel like it.”

“Come to think of it, Ryoko-san once mentioned with a smile that it was like a treasure trove of illegal dumping…”

“Heh heh heh! That’s quite a fitting description. Well, have fun with it.”

“Everyone! Breakfast is ready!”

Just as his conversation with Washu was wrapping up, Sasami came out cheerfully carrying a pot of miso soup. Her bright voice lifted his slightly gloomy mood. And with that as a signal, Ryoko and Aeka, who had been hiding to avoid Mihoshi and Washu’s attacks, came out of hiding.

“Haa...”

After ending the call, Kiriko pressed her temples and breathed a small sigh.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Kiriko? Why are you holding your head like that?”

“I heard Mitoto-sama showed up at Tenchi-kun’s house. Apparently, they took her broom and are keeping it at the Masaki house for now, so we’ll take her back with us tomorrow.”

“Oh, boy. It’s not surprising coming from Mitoto-sama… but still, how on earth did she manage to get to the Masaki family’s house on Earth?”

“Anyway, Seina-chan is supposed to be coming back today, so tomorrow we’ll all go to the Masaki house, pick up Kamidake, and head back.”

“Got it.”

Kiriko and Amane carried the stacks of documents from the guest room to the living room.

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“Are you really okay? You didn’t sleep last night, did you?”

While looking at the thick, phonebook-like manual that Kiriko had given them, Kyouko and Hokuto stared intently at Kiriko and the others' faces. But there was no sign of fatigue on their faces.

“It’s all so sudden, isn’t it…? Well, it can’t be helped since it’s work, but in the end, I guess I just ended up making you guys work so hard for my sake. I’m sorry.”

“It's fine. After all, the whole point was to say hello to Seina-chan's family, and more than anything, everyone was having a good time.”

“It’s definitely a job that could bring in a decent amount of money… I wonder what I should do.”

Hokuto’s concern was about tax issues. If it were just a small favor, there wouldn’t be a problem, but since the work was so specialized, he was pondering how to handle Kiriko and the others.

“Please leave that to us.”

“Oh, really? If you say so, Ringo-san, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Thank you. Also, later this evening, I’ve arranged for the security expert and the accounting advisor I mentioned earlier to come by, so I’ll introduce you to them.”

“I really can’t thank you enough for taking care of everything.”

“Please don’t worry about it. We’re doing this so that Seina-sama can work without any worries.”

“Come on, everyone. We’re busy today, so let’s hurry.”

“Got it!”

At Kiriko’s command, everyone nodded briskly. After all, they had to wrap up their work today.

“Seina-kun, I heard you've been ordered to return to base, but you're going back to your parents' house today, right?”

“Yes. Well, I suppose it's okay for today... We'll depart from here tomorrow morning.”

“Well, things are going to be hectic tomorrow morning. I guess lunch is our only option… Hey, Seina-kun, why don’t you stay for lunch at my place? I was thinking of making our usual hot pot.”

“The chicken hot pot at your place?” Seina’s face lit up instantly.

This was what Tenchi had been discussing with Noike earlier.

“I’ve already asked Aunt Kei to get us some chicken. I’m sorry I can’t do much more for you than this…”

“That’s exactly what I was looking forward to eating most when I got back to Earth. I’m so

happy.”

“That's encouraging to hear. Okay, I'll go get some ingredients from the field. Wait for me.”

“Ah, I'll go too!”

Seina followed after Tenchi, who had run off.

“Huh!? Neeju-chan, are you leaving already?” As Yoshiko sipped her barley tea after the meal, she looked at Neeju's face in surprise.

“Yes. I suddenly got called in for work and have to go back tomorrow morning. I'm sorry.”

“I see… So Kiriko-san and the others are already at the shop…”

By the time Yoshiko and Neeju had woken up, Kiriko and Yoshiko’s father had already left for the shop. Only her mother had stayed behind to explain the situation to Yoshiko and the others and to take care of breakfast.

“But if it's for work, then there's nothing we can do. In that case, why don't we go out for a bit? My friend wants to hear your story, Neeju-chan.”

After all, the women Seina had brought along were billed as beautiful women from the city. Yoshiko’s friends were itching to hear about the latest fashions and stories from the city.

“My story? But I haven’t really left the house much, so I can’t talk about things like Kiriko-san and the others do. Is that okay?”

“They said they want to hear about Kiriko-san and the others, so it’s fine. Of course, I told them not to ask about anything you can’t tell them.”

“Alright, then.”

“Yoshiko, don’t drag Neeju-chan around too much and wear her out.” Kyouko called out to them as she cleared away Yoshiko and the others’ dishes.

After all, they had a long way to go home, so the travel alone would be exhausting. On top of that, they had to go straight to work as soon as they got back.

“I know. We’re just going to talk at home. Let’s go!”

“Don’t forget your keys! We have guests coming over at noon, so you’ll have to come back here!”

“Okay! Got it!”

Just like Kiriko and the others, with only one day to spare, they couldn’t afford to waste any time. Yoshiko grabbed Neeju and dashed out like a bullet.

“Tenchi-chan!” Kei called out from the veranda in the living room, peering into the house.

Beside her were her daughter, Kasumi, and her grandson, Tairō. Tenchi, who had been rushing back and forth to the fields and relaxing with Seina in the dining room at the back of the house, ran over.

“Aunt Kei, Kasumi-san, you’re here already? If you’d let me know, I would’ve come to pick you up.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just wanted to see Seina-chan’s face.”

Kei handed Tenchi a large package and waved to Seina.

“Kitty!”

Tairō, who was being held by Kasumi, reached out as soon as he saw Fuku playing on the sofa. Of course, he couldn’t possibly reach from where Kasumi was holding him, but Fuku hid behind Ryo-Ohki in surprise, and Ryo-Ohki positioned herself as if to shield Fuku. After all, Ryo-Ohki had once been played with by Tairō, who grabbed her tail and even used her as a pacifier.

“Kitty!”

“No, Tairō. The kitty is startled, isn’t she?” Kasumi said as she held Tairō’s hand and smiled reassuringly at Ryo-Ohki and Fuku.

“It’s been a while. Aunt Kei, Kasumi-san. Tairō-kun, you’ve grown so much.”

“Seina-chan looks completely different. Just like Tsukiko-san said, he’s really grown up, hasn’t he? I heard he came home with some real stunners? Kai-kun was going around telling everyone about it.”

“...They’re my coworkers. People who’ve been helping me out with all sorts of things. I was planning to introduce them properly once things at the shop settled down, but then we suddenly got orders to return to base.”

“Well, work is work. We’ll see them again.”

“Welcome.”

Hearing Kei and the others’ voices, Noike and Sasami hurried over with a teapot and glasses. Noike took the package of chicken from Tenchi and headed back to the kitchen.

“There’s no need to stand in the door chatting, please come in.”

“Alright, we’ll intrude then.”

Invited in by Tenchi, Kei and the others went straight from the veranda into the living room.

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“Kitty!”

Sitting on the living room sofa, Tenchi and the others watched with a smile as Tairō waved his hands, looking as if he wanted to pick up Ryo-Ohki and Fuku.

“Oh my, how adorable!”

Perhaps alerted by the sound of their voices, Mitoto poked her head out from the door of Washu’s lab and, upon spotting Tairō, stepped out.

“Tenchi-chan, could this be…?”

“My name is Mitoto. Thank you for always looking out for Mihoshi.”

“Well, well, it really is Mitoto-sama. And thank you so much for always looking out for my daughter…” **(TN: This is probably Kei speaking. Who the hell is the daughter she’s talking about? Based on their conversation in Shido Hen, I’m guessing Kiriko.)**

“The pleasure is mine. Hey, little one, what’s your name?”

Cutting the formalities short, as if she couldn’t wait any longer, Mitoto poked Tairō’s cheek. Once they got to this point, the two mothers were on the same wavelength. They warmed up to each other instantly,

“His name is Tairō. He’s about 15 months old.” Kasumi said and handed Tairō to Mitoto.

“Ohhh… He’s sooo cute!”

Mitoto cradled Tairō as if he were a precious treasure. Her eyes were different from the Mitoto they usually knew. They were the calm, loving eyes of a mother.

“Kitty.”

Tairō seemed to like Mitoto too; he didn’t mind being held and pointed toward Ryo-Ohki and Fuku.

“I see… kitty, huh?”

Relieved that Tairō was being held, Ryo-Ohki and Fuku sat on the table, wagging their tails as they watched Him. He seemed content with this as well; he didn’t try to reach out and quietly allowed himself to be held by Mitoto.

(……Phew. Thanks to Tairō-chan, I’m saved.) Washu, who had been secretly watching the scene through a crack in the door, muttered to herself. After all, just a moment ago, Mitoto had been so desperate to get her broom back that she’d been chasing after Washu like a duckling.

(Now I can finally get back to work.) Washu closed the door gently, trying not to make a

sound.

“Come to think of it, Tennyo-sama has told me all about your exploits, Seina-kun.”

“Do you know about Tennyo-sama, Kasumi-san?”

“She’s the one who oversees the Masaki women, the head of the main branch. Of course I know her. Normally, Katsuhito-sama’s wife would be in that position, but she’s an outsider, and Rea-san is too, isn’t she?”

Airi’s position was too unique, and Rea was outside the main family line because Nobuyuki was an adopted son-in-law. That left Tennyo as the eldest. Of course, Katsuhito was the one who oversaw the Masaki men. Next in line would be Tenchi, but if Katsuhito designated him, Nobuyuki could take that role as well.

“As for Seina-kun, unlike Tenchi-kun, he’s a pure-blooded Earthling, right? So, since I thought I'd never see you again, I was really happy, and every time we meet, she tells me all sorts of stories about your time at the Academy.”

“I-I see.”

He felt a mix of happiness and embarrassment. After all, he still clearly remembered crying when they first met.

“I’ve been hearing about Seina-kun’s recent life from my sister, too… And since Noike-san is close with Kiriko-san, I hear from her occasionally as well.”

“I-I see... I’m really happy that you’re all thinking of me like this.”

“Everyone loves Seina-chan, so it’s only natural.”

“Ah… thank you.”

It wasn’t just Tsukiko, everyone associated with the Masaki’s were all like family to Seina.

“Hey, Seina-chan, have you thought about what you want to do in the future?”

“Nothing specific, really... I suppose I'll be working in the Decoy Division of the GP...”

“You're asking the wrong way, Kasumi. What she means is, where are you going to live in the future? Normally, with GP, personnel assignments are based on teams for a few years, but Seina-chan is already going to be in a specialized role, right?”

GP members started out as trainees. Eventually, based on their preferences and aptitude, they chose a department and the team was disbanded, but for the first few years, sometimes more than ten, they were assigned to various departments as ordinary members, with their teammates as a unit.

“In that case, where you live is also taken into consideration to some extent. There are even people who have families, so you won’t be living in the dorms forever.”

“Aunt Kei, you really know your stuff, don’t you?”

“I’m a GP member myself, you know. I’m actually the head of the Earth branch of the delivery division.”

“Whaaaaaat?! So you’re my superior?” Seina quickly stood up and saluted.

“Hahaha! There are actually quite a few in Masaki Village. People in the delivery division, the cleaning department like Mitoto-sama, and part-time members of the security division, for example.”

“I-I didn’t know that…”

“Of course, some have retired and come back, but most of them hold some kind of position.”

“So farming and raising chickens aren’t their main jobs, huh?”

“Tenchi-chan… Even Mihoshi-san and Noike-san have other jobs while doing housework and farm work, right? It’s the same thing. There are a few vacant houses in Masaki Village, but there are people who will definitely come back to them… So, Seina-chan, I’m wondering if you’d like to make Masaki Village your home base in the future. Of course, you’ll probably have a place at the Academy and elsewhere too.”

“Here… you mean my home?”

“Come to think of it, Seina-kun’s Kamidake has living quarters, just like an Imperial Ship, right?”

“Huh? Well, yeah… it’s huge—the kind of place where you’d wonder, ‘Could millions of people live there?’…”

“In that case, if you dock it at a GP dock that’s convenient for work, wouldn’t you not need to have a house here? Of course, I’m not saying you have to live here permanently. It’s just… I don’t want Seina-chan to forget about this village. You’re practically one of the kids from this village, after all.”

“!!”

Seina was so happy at Kei’s words he felt like he might cry. The Royal Tree, “Funaho,” that had always watched over him. The Masaki family, starting with Tenchi, who was like a brother to him. The people of Masaki Village who had always cherished him. The familiar scenery of the valley. And Seina himself, the feeling he’d had upon returning here, that this was his hometown… If that was the case, there was no reason to refuse Kei’s proposal.

“I understand… I’ll definitely come back here someday.”

Even if it were only once every few years, or once every few decades, he was certain of the fact that his hometown, the roots of his heart, lay here.

“Myaa.” Fuku looked up at Seina and meowed happily. It seemed as though she was supporting and blessing Seina’s decision. In a sense, this was Fuku’s birthplace, too.

“Tenchi-sama, lunch preparations are all set.” Noike said, sensing that the matter had been settled.

“Thank you, Noike-san. If Aunt Kei and Kasumi-san would like to, please stay and have lunch with us. It’s also a farewell party for Seina-kun.”

“In that case, shall we accept the invitation?”

Kasumi nodded in agreement at Kei’s question.

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Tenchi was the head chef for the Masaki family’s hot pot. Of course, Noike and Sasami could make delicious hot pot too… No, in a way, they might even make something better than Tenchi’s. And since Noike and the others handled the prep work, strictly speaking, it wasn’t exactly Tenchi’s flavor, but the rule was that the Masaki family’s hot pot must be finished by Tenchi, the head of the household.

Tenchi carefully arranged the ingredients, thinking through their placement. Then he poured in the dashi broth made from kelp and lit the portable gas stove. Everyone present watched in silence. Tenchi judged the state of the ingredients by the sound of the pot boiling. His concentration created a sense of tension, and those around him watched his every move in silence, careful not to disrupt the atmosphere.

“Like Mother, like son… that vibe is exactly like Kiyone-sama’s.”

Tairō couldn’t very well stay silent, so Kei and Kasumi took him aside to watch from a short distance away.

“When it came to cooking, Kiyone-sama was on a whole different level. She was seriously a demon. Nobuyuki-san couldn’t handle that kind of tension, so he’d often crack a joke and get kicked out of the house, didn’t he?”

“Oh yeah, that's right.”

“Eventually, when Nobuyuki-san was out during mealtime, we knew that Kiyone-nee's family was having hot pot that day.”

“That's a sad story...”

“But the fact that he doesn't let you feel that way is his best quality, isn't it?”

Nobuyuki was basically an optimist. It might not be the best analogy, but he was kind of like an older Ryo-Ohki.

“I really couldn't bear to watch when Kiyone-sama passed away... but it's all thanks to you, Rea-chan.”

“Come to think of it, she’s almost full-term, isn’t she?”

“They say it’s a boy. But you know…”

“You don’t mean Rea-san is going to give birth in this world…!” Kasumi lowered her voice, remembering that Tenchi was there.

“If it’s a boy, does that mean he will be born over there?”

“It seems they’ll give him as much education as possible before he turns fifteen. At least enough so he can survive anywhere. I hear they’ve asked Washu-chan for help too…”

“...I hope that child can grow up safely before going over there...”

“Alright! It’s ready.”

At Tenchi’s call, Kei and Kasumi returned to the table.

In the summer, Tenchi’s hot pot was eaten with ponzu sauce whipped into a slushy consistency. Extra sauce was frozen and shaved into shaved ice to keep it cold.

“Ahh… It’s been a while since I’ve had Earth chicken.” Seina savored a bite of the chicken dipped in the sauce.

The chicken was so tender from simmering that the meat fell apart with just a few bites. The vegetables were perfectly cooked too, each one sweet and absolutely delicious.

“Seina-kun, don’t you have chicken over there?”

“……Hmm. It’s not among the things they usually sell. Even the stuff Kiriko-san occasionally orders for us feels a little off…”

“Um, Washu-chan. Is there no chicken over there?”

When it came to breadth of knowledge, Washu was definitely number one. Plus, she knew a lot about Earth’s chickens.

“Hm? Oh, if you mean something with a texture similar to this…” Washu chewed on the chicken as she thought.

“Ah! Speaking of chicken… when I was on my way to the GP Academy dorm, I got attacked by a weird chicken-like monster, and I almost ended up as food for its chicks!”

“Were you okay, Seina-kun?”

“Luckily, there was something like a weapon that was used as material for the nest...”

“And you took it down with that?”

“No, it snatched it right out of my hands with something like a tentacle.”

"……So, what happened then?"

The exchange turned into something like a strange comedy routine, and Tenchi asked again with a puzzled expression. As long as Seina was here, there was no doubt he was safe.

"I was saved when the weapon that thing picked went off accidentally… but after that, a lot happened, and in the end, someone from the GP came to my rescue. And according to that person, that animal was a rare, protected experimental animal, apparently one of the Academy's Three Great Delicacies, and sold for a pretty high price."

"Heh heh heh! Seina-dono, did you try eating it?" Washu, who had been listening to the story, must have had an idea what was going on. She was desperately trying to suppress her laughter.

"Ah... no. I mean, seeing it get minced right in front of me was a bit much..."

"That's a shame. In terms of meat texture, that animal is the closest to this one." With that, Washu picked up a piece of chicken from her plate with her chopsticks.

"R-really? …But it didn't look very appetizing, and at that price, I couldn't just casually eat it."

"That's exactly the point. But this is something you can eat casually on Earth. So don't you think we could make a profit if we took it over there?" Washu had a hobby of dealing in such imitations and counterfeits. As she spoke, her face was the very image of a crooked merchant straight out of a period drama.

"Well, if I can eat chicken in space…"

"Seina-nii-chan, Seina-nii-chan. Washu-nee-chan's planning to make a profit, so I think it'll end up costing a fair bit." Sasami tugged at Seina's sleeve as she warned him.

"Seina-chan. If you'd like, I can send some directly to you from time to time."

"R-really, Aunt Kei?"

"Or, why not just keep some on Seina-chan's ship?"

"……I'll discuss it with Kiriko-san when I get the chance."

It would be nice to be able to eat chicken in space. Of course, there was sukiyaki, but one mustn't forget steamed chicken, teriyaki chicken, chicken curry, and fried chicken. By the way, Seina preferred his fried chicken without any seasoning. It would ruin the delicate flavor of the chicken if it were covered in strange seasonings.

Kai held even more extreme views on the matter. He argued that seasonings like soy sauce or garlic, once the food cooled and was reheated, combined with the oil-soaked batter to make the gamey smell even stronger. He started ranting passionately about how anyone could be so thoughtless. He concluded that it must be the result of a chef's laziness, either due to a lack of taste or sheer habit. Seina generally agreed with that opinion. It was better

to keep the batter light so you could adjust the flavor with soy sauce, ponzu, sauce, or salt depending on your mood. Sometimes, it was delicious enough even without any seasoning.

“Come to think of it, Tenchi-senpai doesn't like putting cheese in chicken cutlets, right?”

“Wha... What's with the sudden change of topic?”

“Oh, no... I was just so happy to hear you were sending me some chicken, and I was thinking about how I should cook it, so I just...”

“Well, chicken is a mild-tasting meat, so I understand the urge to add richness like that... but I can't help feeling that it's actually masking the chicken's natural flavor. Anyway, I'm going to make the next batch, so could you please clear out the pot?”

“Oh, sure.”

Seina removed the remaining vegetables and chicken from the pot, leaving only the broth. After making two rounds of hot pot using these two large earthenware pots, they finished the meal with a rice porridge made with fresh eggs.

“Ahhhh... I'm so full.”

“Fumyaaaaaan”

Seina leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes contentedly. Fuku was sprawled out on Seina’s lap in a similar pose.

“I don’t want to move, but I have to go home.” Seina said and stood up with a burst of energy, after tidying up the area and things had settled down.

“Well, I guess we should be on our way, too.” Kei and Kasumi also got up.

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“We’ll be back tomorrow. And please! Mitoto-san, you absolutely must stop cleaning. Otherwise, your father will scold you again.”

“Okaaaay, I get it...” Mitoto slumped dejectedly under Seina’s glare.

Of course, she didn’t forget to stroke Seina’s crew cut.

“I’ll come pick you up tomorrow.”

Having finished his formal greetings in the living room, Seina declined the others’ offer to see him off and walked to the gate accompanied by Tenchi, Ryo-Ohki, and Kei, Kasumi and her son.

“Kitty!”

In response to Tairō’s words, Fuku wagged her tail happily.

“Speaking of which, are you planning to allow Tairō-kun to go to space in the future?”

“My husband is a pure-blooded Earthling, and we have a lot of relatives here, so I’m not sure what to do.”

If he went to space, he wouldn’t be able to return to Earth easily. If he were estranged from his relatives or if his life was based in Masaki Village, he might be able to cover it up, but if his father’s side of the family was his main focus, it would be difficult to hide. In that case, he’d have no choice but to live as an Earthling.

“Huh? So then...”

“It’s okay! I was prepared for that when I married my husband.”

That meant saying goodbye to her husband, of course, and in some cases, even to Tairō, in a few decades. However, since Tairō was half Masaki, there was the possibility he’d live a long life. The decision at that time would be complicated. To let him live as an Earthling, they could either perform biological modifications early on to deactivate his longevity genes, or take the time to explain the situation to him, make it appear as though he has reached the end of his Earthling lifespan, and then take him into space. Alternatively, if he wished to live as an Earthling, they could choose the first method after explaining the situation to him.

“But, I see… I guess I have to think about it too.”

He’d decided to go with Tenchi to the farthest reaches of infinity. But parting with those close to him was a different matter.

“As long as my husband and this child can live a life without regrets, I think that’s enough. Everyone in the Masaki family has overcome it that way. Yosho-sama’s first wife, from whom I received my name, was a pure Earthling who couldn’t bear to live for such a long time and chose to stop life-prolonging treatment. And that's true for Seina-chan and Tenchi-kun too, isn't it?” Kasumi said then turned to look at the Masaki residence.

But what Kasumi saw wasn’t the current Masaki residence, but the Masaki residence from the past, when it was still a single-story house.

“...I suppose so.”

Realizing that Kasumi was referring to Tenchi’s mother, Kiyone, Tenchi and Seina looked at the Masaki residence just as Kasumi had.

“That’s how we keep on living, isn’t it?”

“...Back then, Tenchi-kun had Seina-kun, and Seina-kun had Tenchi-kun. I believe that when my time comes, Tenchi-kun and Seina-kun will definitely be there for me. So please work even harder and become great men, okay? ♡” Kasumi said with a lighthearted tone, then patted Seina and Tenchi on the shoulder.

“A good man, huh? Hmm… Well, I’ll do my best.”

With somewhat uncertain expressions, Tenchi and Seina nodded.

“Oh, well, I’ll be off then.”

Seina walked over to the main gate, bowed to Tenchi, Kasumi, and the others, then climbed onto the Kai Special, which had been repaired and was now much lighter.

Although he took Washu at her word that she’d only used materials available on Earth, there was a chance it was made of cutting-edge materials typically reserved for military or space-related applications.

“Be careful.”

With Tenchi and the others’ words ringing in his ears, Seina put his foot down on the pedal. Surprised by the smooth ride, which felt just like a brand-new bike, Seina picked up speed and headed up the mountain road.

Chapter Seventeen: Memories of Snow

It was as if snow were falling.

Looking up at the massive windows on three sides, she saw giant trees shrouded in a snowy haze stretching as far as the eye could see, and the way their petals were falling made it look as if snow were falling.

In the center of the spacious room, an elderly man lay on a large bed equipped with medical equipment, accompanied only by a young female nurse.

Then, the nurse whispered something into the old man’s ear.

“...You’ve come, Miss Mikami.”

As if in response to those words, Mikami emerged from the shadows cast by the sunlight streaming through the window and bowed deeply. Her expression was solemn, even showing signs of tension. She looked just like a young grandchild who had come to greet her grandfather with hesitant steps.

The old man who could make even Kuramitsu Mikami seem like a child was the eldest of the Kuramitsu family.

The planet ‘Seniwa’ was currently home only to the Kuramitsu clan, the Imperial Family, and the personnel and facilities necessary for their daily lives. All other forms of civilization had been eliminated in order to recreate the environment of the past. The place where the Grand Elder resided was the smallest continent on Seniwa, about half the size of Australia, but it was the birthplace of the Kuramitsu family, and no one other than the Grand Elder and his nurse lived there.

“The snow-dusted trees are as magnificent as ever. There are few trees of this caliber left at

the Academy."

"It's nearly time for replanting. Just like me."

"Grandfather! Please don't say such things…" Mikami looked as if she were about to cry.

"...I have lived too long. It is time for me to rest."

"……"

"Besides… don't you think you, Mikami, would understand how I feel by now? Hmm?"

It was a gentle question.

"!?"

Mikami's cheeks flushed red. True to form for the eldest of the Kuramitsu family. Though he may be old, he had a grasp on every detail concerning the clan.

"You can give meaning to my death. Shouldn't that be called a stroke of good fortune?"

"I'll… miss you."

Realizing the eldest elder's resolve was firm, Mikami wore a sad smile.

"Hmph…"

The Grand Elder turned to the nurse standing beside him and opened his eyes. Snow-like petals were drifting in from the window. The Elder gazed at them with a look of nostalgia.

"Miyuki... it's snowing...!!"

The snowy haze visible through the window behind the nurse was suddenly whipped up by a strong wind, scattering the petals even more fiercely, as if it were a blizzard.

"Oh! Ah, Mother!"

He reached out desperately, but his hand seemed about to fall limply. The young nurse gently caught his trembling hand.

"Miyuki… are you going to stop it again?" A single tear rolled down the eldest elder's cheek.

What he was seeing was a scene from long, long ago. A woman with fiery red hair and his young stepsister.

His wide-open eyes were green. And the skin the nurse held, white as the petals of a snow-mist flower, unlike that of the Kuramitsu people, belonged to none other than Kuramitsu Mikumo, the son of Hakubi Washu.

Chapter Eighteen: The Moon Shines Bright

When Seina arrived at his parents' house, a minibus that didn't belong there was parked in the yard. But Seina recognized the bus.

"Is that the bus from Masaki Village? Maybe they're going to use it to visit Tenchi-senpai's house tomorrow?" Muttering to himself, Seina carried the Kai Special into the barn.

This was the item he was most attached to. For a moment, he considered taking it with him into space, but he quickly decided to leave it here. He wanted it to serve as proof that Earth was his home.

"Well, see you later." He called out and closed the barn door.

Perhaps Fuku understood what was happening, "Myaa!" She walked over to the Kai Special just like Seina and meowed as if to say goodbye.

"Let's ride it again when we come back to Earth."

Stroking Fuku, Seina went inside the house.

"Welcome home, big brother. Fuku-chan." Yoshiko said as she immediately ran over and scooped Fuku up as if to snatch her away.

"Yoshiko. That bus is from Masaki Village, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Aunt Tsukiko and a funny guest came on it. It's for tomorrow's shuttle service. But big brother, you took Fuku-chan and never brought her back. I wanted to play with her some more!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd be coming back this soon. I'm not going anywhere else today, so please play with her."

"Okay! …I guess so." Yoshiko said with a slightly hesitant look and glanced at Seina.

"Hey, Seina, you don't have anything to do, do you? If not, let's all play together for a change." Perhaps sensing Yoshiko's feelings, Neeju, who was standing nearby, tugged at Seina's hand.

"Huh? But..."

"Myaa!" Fuku looked up at Seina and meowed, as if begging to play.

"I guess its okay as long as it's not too rough?"

"Then let's play cards. Wait here, I'll go get them!"

Yoshiko hurried up to her room. It was as if she thought Seina would disappear if she didn't hurry.

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“Hahaha! Big brother, you have terrible luck!”

Yoshiko rolled around on the floor, laughing gleefully. They’d started playing cards in the living room, but Seina had lost every single game in a row, unable to win a single one.

In Old Maid, he always drew the “old lady” card, and in Sevens, he kept getting only Aces and Kings. No matter how carefully he shuffled or cut the deck, the cards that put Seina at a disadvantage kept piling up. Even more surprising was Fuku. Or rather, considering Fuku’s background, it was only to be expected…

Wanting to find a game Fuku could play too, they started playing Memory, but she won almost every single round. Toward the end, she even matched all the cards on her first try. The reason was that Fuku had memorized every tiny scratch and smudge on the backs of the cards. Indeed, Fuku was the terminal unit from a high-performance spaceship. With her vision, spotting the slightest difference was a breeze.

In the end, after playing cards for about two hours, perhaps because the matches were so one-sided that it became boring, Yoshiko started a game where she stacked the cards in a pyramid shape.

“Mya!”

Seeing this, Fuku’s eyes lit up, and she dove straight toward the pyramid.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

Perhaps she enjoyed knocking the pyramid down, because Fuku begged her to build it again.

“Okaaaay!”

Yoshiko eagerly began stacking the cards again. But stacking cards was difficult in and of itself, it was like a game. Often, the tower would collapse before Fuku even knocked it over.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

“No, Fuku. Playing cards aren't made to stand up like building blocks.” Seina picked up Fuku, who was pestering her, so as not to disturb her.

“Oh! Wait a second!” Yoshiko suddenly stood up and left the living room.

A few minutes later, she returned carrying a large cardboard box.

“What are you going to do with all of these?”

Inside the box was a huge pile of dominoes.

“We used these for the grand opening event. With these…” Yoshiko began setting up the dominoes with practiced ease.

“You seem pretty skilled at this.”

“I’ve set up so many thousands, maybe even tens of thousands, I’ve lost count! Dad once got drunk on the celebratory sake and nearly knocked them all down! I couldn’t believe it!”

“Oh, really? That must have been a nightmare.”

“It really was.”

Despite her grumbling, Yoshiko set up about a hundred dominoes.

“Fuku-chan, try knocking over this end here.”

“Myaa?”

“See, like this.”

Yoshiko picked up Fuku and placed her front paw against the domino at the end. With a series of dry clattering sounds, the dominoes fell in a chain reaction.

“Myaa!” Fuku’s eyes sparkled as she watched the falling dominoes.

“Myaa! Myaa!”

“See? With this, we can even build a house.” Yoshiko quickly built a four-story building.

“Myaa!” Fuku immediately pounced on it and knocked it down.

“Myaa! Myaa! Myaa!” Fuku hopped around excitedly. She seemed to really love this game.

“Okaaaay! I'll build you lots of them!” Perhaps because she was happy to see Fuku so delighted, Yoshiko eagerly began stacking the dominoes.

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“We're home.”

It was past seven in the evening when Kiriko and the others finally returned.

“I'm sorry about that. You must be hungry, right…?”

Peering into the living room, Kiriko and the others gasped at the spectacular sight that spread out before them.

The miniature city set made of dominoes, which took up nearly half the living room, looked like it could be used to film a monster movie.

“Migyaoun!”

Emerging from within as she destroyed the small buildings was the monster Fukuzilla, presumably appearing from underground.

“Whoa!” Kiriko and the girls gasped.

It was praise for her enthusiastic performance.

“Migya! Migyaaooon!”

Fukuzilla headed toward a particularly massive skyscraper deep within the city, wreaking havoc along the way. Trampling houses, toppling small buildings, and repeating this rampage of destruction, Fukuzilla finally reached the massive skyscraper.

“Migyaaaaaaan!”

But the massive building seemed to have been heavily reinforced; it didn’t budge an inch even under Fukuzilla’s punches. Then, Fukuzilla began to chip away at a single spot on the building. It looked just like a lumberjack trying to fell a giant tree.

“Migyaa! Migyaa!”

Under Fukuzilla’s assault, even the massive skyscraper slowly began to collapse.

CRASH! The massive building collapsed with a loud crash, turning into a pile of rubble.

Then, Fukuzilla calmly climbed up the pile and let out a triumphant roar, “Migyaaaaaaah!”

“Ooooh!”

A collective murmur and round of applause erupted from Kiriko and the others. It was in appreciation of Fuku’s brilliant performance and the hard work of Seina, Yoshiko, and Neeju, who had built the miniature set.

“Let's clean up now. Dinner will be ready soon.”

“Okayyyy. That was fun, big brother.” Yoshiko spoke to Seina with genuine delight.

“Y… yeah. With this many dominoes, we can do all sorts of things, can’t we?”

For a moment, Yoshiko’s face overlapped with a memory of her from long ago, when she was a little girl who used to come over to show off her new clothes. Seeing this, Seina smiled shyly.

“Myaa!” Fuku, wanting to share in the joy, scrambled up onto Seina’s shoulder and meowed at Yoshiko.

“That’s right, Fuku-chan had fun too, didn’t you?”

(Hehe, I’m glad for you, Yoshiko-chan.) Neeju watched the siblings with a smile.

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“Big brother. It goes faster if you do it this way.” Seeing Seina and the others scoop up the dominoes with their hands and start putting them in the cardboard box, Yoshiko began

raking them up with a dustpan.

“We’ll take care of this here, so Kiriko-chan and the others, please go to the kitchen, and those who want to take a bath, please take turns.” Kyouko gave her instructions briskly and began helping to clean up the dominoes.

“I’ll help too,”

A young woman he didn’t recognize chimed in and began helping with the cleanup.

“……?”

Seina felt a sense of unease about the woman’s demeanor but continued cleaning up. The dustpan was incredibly effective, and in no time, the dominoes were packed into the cardboard box.

“Oh, just stack the boxes in the corner. But Seina, this is your first time meeting her, right?” Kyouko took Seina by the hand and led him to stand in front of the unfamiliar young woman.

“This is Ringo-san's subordinate, and she's going to be our accounting and management advisor...”

“Nice to meet you, young master. My name is Nene Kurin. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“...Ah, I’m Yamada Seina. Nice to meet you too...”

Feeling a bit flustered by the unfamiliar term ‘young master,’ Seina leaned in closer to Nene. “Um... Are you from Wau, by any chance?”

“What?! How did you know that?!”

“Ah, I knew it.”

Even when disguised as a human, the slight difference in shape would be immediately noticeable to someone familiar with Wau. Conversely, since there were not many Wau on Jurai, they were less likely to be discovered when disguised.

“Since you’re Ringo-san’s subordinate, you’re one of them, right? ……Wh-what’s wrong??”

Nene kept her face close, peering intently at Seina’s face. The frown between her eyebrows gradually deepened. And another thing, Kyouko, standing next to her, was somehow trying to stifle a laugh, which was a little concerning.

“Young master, you smell!”

“Bwah!” Kyouko couldn’t hold it in any longer and burst out laughing.

“I’m s-sorry. I’ll take a bath later.”

“No! You have to take one now! Right this minute!”

“No, but...”

He was pretty sure the girls were in there right now… He was about to say that, but…

“I won’t let you run away! Come on, let’s go right now! Nene will give you a good scrub! Come on, your little one too!”

“Huh!? W-w-w-what!??

“Myaa??”

With a look in her eyes that was anything but normal, Nene grabbed Seina and Fuku firmly and charged straight into the bathroom. From behind them, Kyouko’s voice echoed as she burst out laughing, unable to hold it in.

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“Wait a minute! Stop! Someone else is in there!” Dragged into the changing room, Seina noticed the clothes and underwear there and desperately resisted Nene’s onslaught, trying to keep her from stripping him.

However, the clothes he was clutching with both hands were being pulled off one by one without any resistance. And then, she deftly began stripping off her own clothes as well. It was a skill so impressive it could only be described as magic.

Naturally, the commotion had reached those in the bathroom. Currently in the bathroom were Ringo, Hakuren, Suiren, and Tsukiko.

“Those voices are Seina-sama and Nene!” Ringo, who knew Nene’s habits inside out, instantly understood what was happening in the changing room.

Hakuren and Suiren, who had been washing Ringo’s body, sprang into action immediately. However, due to their positions, they were just a split second too late in blocking the door.

Crash! Hakuren and the Suiren tried to restrain Nene as she burst into the bathroom, but there stood Seina, completely naked and pinned in a bear hug.

“!!”

In a sense, for the girls present, it was like seeing ‘Medusa’s head.’ In that instant, they were all frozen in place.

“Ah, aaaah…”

Though they were talented, they were still girls. It was understandable that their minds would go blank when they saw the naked body of someone they had feelings for. Even if

they'd been in the same bathroom several times, seeing that person so directly and completely was completely unexpected.

Hakuren instantly fell into a state of fantasy, while Suiren, perhaps due to the lingering effects of Bio-Enhancement modification, found multiple emotions clashing within her. Perhaps judging that operating in this state was dangerous, her body went into a state of paralysis.

And Ringo thought, (……Ah, there's nothing left to do but let Seina-sama have me!) and resigned herself to it without a fight. Even Tsukiko, who was usually the most capable of handling such situations, found it too embarrassing to get out of the tub with Seina right in front of her. Plus, his surprisingly masculine physique had her heart racing. Even though they'd reset their relationship, as long as the romance flag was firmly in place, things couldn't go back to the way they were when Seina was a child.

(If only Ringo-sama would...)

If Ringo hadn't given in, if she still had the will to preserve her chastity, her sense of duty to protect the Imperial Family's princess would have overcome her shame… But anyway, now that Nene has started washing Seina's body, it was already too late.

Nene's washing technique wasn't rough. Having shed her disguise and returned to her true form as a Wau, Nene's paws were the ultimate cleaning tools, soft fur and paw pads. Her cleaning technique was top-notch, reaching every nook and cranny, with her paw pads hitting all the right spots. Being washed by that technique was no joke.

"Ugh… Ah…" Seina writhed in pleasure. Despite clenching his jaw, a moan slipped out involuntarily.

Gulp. Though it's unclear whose it was, the sound of someone swallowing echoed through the bathroom. …Well, what can you say? There's a young man she had both affection and interest in, writhing right before her eyes, and she could hear his sensual moans. Between feeling embarrassed and intrigued, it was no wonder no one even considered trying to stop Nene. Yeah, no way.

Ringo and the others finally looked away from Seina only after Nene's attention shifted to Fuku.

"Mya. Myaa… Myauuun" Fuku was letting out sounds of pleasure at Nene's technique behind Seina, who was soaking in the tub, completely limp.

Incidentally, Nene didn't come to her senses and realize what was going on until after she'd washed Fuku, then Hakuren, then Suiren, then Ringo, and finally Tsukiko, tossing them all into the bathtub, "Phew," and exhaled contentedly.

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"I don't mind anymore, so please lift your head." Seina said while averting his eyes from Nene, who stood silently with her head bowed.

Even for Seina, who was used to trouble, having been washed from head to toe, and on top of that, letting out those awkward sounds and such that made him want to die just thinking about it because it felt so good, was too much. It was far too embarrassing to look her in the eye, and the slightest trigger might set off a flashback. And on top of that, having to listen to Hakuren and the others' shrill laughter afterward was just the last straw. Well, Nene's utter fluster after she came to her senses did help him forget that embarrassment, if only for a brief moment. Still, Seina's gloom persisted.

Every time Ringo made eye contact with Seina, she blushed and gazed at him with teary, half-crying eyes while smiling, while Tsukiko, on the other hand, refused to meet Seina's gaze even once. Hakuren muttered something to herself under her breath, and Suiren remained silent, only occasionally letting out a soft chuckle.

Furthermore, aside from those directly involved, Amane, Gyokuren, Kiriko, Ryoko, and Karen, who had come running after hearing the commotion in the bathroom partway through, each reacted in their own way.

Amane and Gyokuren were the first to rush to the changing room and peek inside. Amane was grinning cheerfully as she watched Seina and the others' reactions, while Gyokuren wore an unnervingly serene smile, as if reliving the moment over and over again. Kiriko was suppressing her pent-up anger, her brow deeply furrowed, Ryoko was pretending not to notice, and Karen was banging her head against the wall, trying to forget the memories that kept flashing back.

Well, Neeju was her usual self, and Fuku, with a coat as fluffy as a futon dried in the sun, was thoroughly content in Yoshiko's arms.

"Well then, it's a little late, but thank you all so much for your hard work up until today. Ringo-san will continue to assist Nene-san with the accounting, and thanks to you all, we feel confident that our shop can look forward to further growth…"

With Hokuto's opening remarks, the dinner party, which also served as a farewell gathering, began. Aside from the rice and miso soup, every dish on the table was a prototype made in the shop. However, since Kiriko and the others had cooked them, and they incorporated ideas from Sasami and Noike, they were exquisite dishes that could rival even the catering from a famous, long-established restaurant.

With Kiriko and the others' work finished, it should have been a joyful dinner as they looked forward to their departure the next day without a care in the world, but the incident involving Nene still lingered in the air.

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Now, let's take a look at how everyone was feeling.

——Ringo's case.

(Ah... Father-in-law, Mother-in-law. Please forgive me for addressing you this way.)

Ringo was so ashamed of having stared at Seina's indecent state without looking away that she wanted to die. Of course, she herself had been seen in an indecent state as well, but that was beside the point right now.

(I suppose I should take my own life, but even so… please, please forgive me for choosing such a selfish, self-serving solution.)

Ringo stared intently at Seina and thought, (Please allow me to become Seina-sama's wife and serve you with all my heart for the rest of my life…) she vowed firmly in her heart.

——As for Tsukiko.

(Ugh! Kuisu-sama, you idiot, idiot, idiot! Even though I was so determined to just be Seina-chan's aunt…)

Back when he went to space, Seina still had the frail body of a young boy. But more than the Bio-Enhancement he'd received, Seina's combat experience in space had transformed his body into that of a real man. And on top of that, to be shown that seductive figure…

(Oh, for heaven's sake! Kuisu-sama, you idiot, you idiot, you idiot!)

Anyway, the only way to erase the memories etched into her this time was to replace them with the image of the innocent Seina from past memories. To do that, she had to avoid looking at the current Seina as much as possible and prevent any flashbacks. …Yeah, she'll do her best.

——In Hakuren's case.

(Ah, I have no choice but to bear Seina-sama's child!)

——In Suiren's case.

(……Seina-sama……cute)

We won't go into exactly what made him cute, but if Seina found out, he'd definitely have a mental breakdown. Fortunately, it was just a thought, it hadn't been put into words. After all, Suiren was a quiet person. Phew, what a relief.

——In Amane's case.

(Now then…… Who would be the most entertaining to hear that situation from? Heh heh heh)

……Well, it seems she was thinking some pretty outrageous things.

——In Gyokuren's case.

(……Heh)

……It seems she was laughing at the memory.

——In Karen’s case.

(……Seina-sama. ……Guh! No, no! What are you thinking about?! I’m such an idiot, idiot, idiot!)

Every now and then, she suddenly remembered Seina’s seductive voice, blushed, and got lost in thought, only to immediately fall into self-loathing, and the cycle repeated. …At least try not to break the wall.

——Kiriko’s case.

(……I’ll kill you!)

Who?

——Ryoko’s case.

(I guess it's my job to stop Kiriko-san after all... I don't want to.)

Ryoko, the calmest of the group, was the only one who sensed Kiriko’s ominous killing intent. It felt like the tragedy of the one person among a bunch of drunks who couldn’t drink and ended up playing nurse. …My condolences.

——Neeju’s case.

(Oh dear, everyone’s looking a bit pale… Well, so am I, actually.)

Since Neeju was still physically immature, she didn't have any sexual desires yet. …….

——In Fuku’s case.

(Fumyaa...)

She wanted Nene to wash her again.

That was the state of their minds. Incidentally, Hokuto didn’t notice any of this, Kyouko found it amusing, and Nene, the root of the problem, felt her fear grow even more toward Ringo, who didn’t blame her for anything. She was trembling and breaking out in a cold sweat from fear.

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“...Well then, here's to seeing you all again.” Hokuto picked up a mug filled to the brim with beer.

At that signal, everyone raised their glasses and mugs.

“...Well then, cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Each person raised their voice, as if releasing their own thoughts. With everyone’s toast, Hokuto’s speech came to a close, and the meal began.

Thud!

And just then, in the corner of the room, Nene, having reached the limit of her terror, finally lost consciousness.

——About an hour later.

“Well then, good night!”

Yoshiko, holding Fuku, whose belly was bulging and whose eyes were already half-closed, left the living room with Neeju and returned to her own room. Taking that as a cue, Kyouko exchanged a glance with Hokuto. Hokuto stood up, still holding his beer mug, and walked over to Seina’s side.

“Hey, Seina, do you want to talk for a minute, just the two of us?”

“Talk?”

“Well, it’s our last night. It’s nice to have some guy time, right?”

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Seina and Hokuto went out into the garden, set up a wooden bench about the size of a single tatami mat, and placed a large tray piled high with snacks, sake, and juice on it. Of course, they had already set up a pig-shaped incense burner filled with mosquito coils.

“It’s a full moon tonight… It’s beautiful.”

Seated on the veranda, Hokuto and Seina clinked their beer and juice glasses together.

“My dream was to share a drink with my son someday… but even when you come of age, you probably shouldn’t drink alcohol, should you?”

“Yeah. I think so too.”

Drinking alcohol dulled both your split-second judgment and your physical reflexes. For someone as unlucky as Seina, that was a deadly combination.

“Well, just being able to have a grown-up conversation like this with you is a dream come true in itself.”

The two took a sip of their drinks while gazing at the full moon.

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“Well then, now that the kids and the men are gone…”

After Hokuto and Seina went out into the garden, Kyouko locked the sliding door and closed the inner shoji screen. Then, returning to her seat, she looked around at the women.

“You all have something you want to say, don’t you?”

“What do you mean, ‘something to say’…?”

“It’s still early in the evening… We’ve got plenty of sake left, and there’s still food on the table. Since we’re here, why don’t we just spill the beans?”

“Spill the beans?”

“Kiriko-chan, frowning like that isn’t good for your health.”

“……”

Kiriko had been consciously trying to avoid the topic of the bathroom, but when Kyouko hit the nail on the head, she pouted, her mouth forming a frown.

“Hehe. Since my mother-in-law has gone to the trouble of speaking up… let’s just call it an informal gathering from here on out.”

With permission granted by Ringo of the Imperial Family, the most senior person present, the tense atmosphere instantly dissolved.

“Whoa! It’s getting pretty lively over there.”

A tsunami of cheers erupted from the living room. Hokuto and Seina were slightly intrigued by the commotion, but they figured it was better not to eavesdrop on the conversation.

“By the way… are you enjoying school?” Hokuto asked as he looked up at moonlit night again.

“Huh? Yeah, it’s fun. Everyone’s accepting me… Oh!” Seina trailed off mid-sentence. It was because what he was about to say sounded like a criticism of his parents and the people here.

“...Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that over there, they have a proper understanding of people like me. So they know how to handle situations like this...”

“So they don’t get scared more than necessary.”

“...Yeah.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Huh?”

“It really is a joy to have someone who accepts you… I understand exactly how you feel.” Hokuto said thoughtfully, glancing toward the living room, then his expression clouded slightly.

“If you hadn’t started kindergarten and met the Masaki’s, who knows what would have become of our family. I can say this now, but it wouldn’t have been strange if we’d all committed suicide together.”

“……”

Seina was still very young at the time, so he didn’t remember the details, but back then, the Yamada household was suffocated by an oppressive, stifling atmosphere. Just recalling that image sent a chill down his spine.

“Mom, especially, felt like the fact that you were born that way was her fault, and she was always blaming herself… It really felt like she could have broken down at any moment.”

“But I didn’t sense anything like that at all…”

Of course, that was just the surface. Just as Seina had hidden the pain of his wounds and smiled at Yoshiko, Kyouko also desperately tried to smile.

“I'll never forget it. When you came home from kindergarten and told me, all excited, that you'd made your first friend... And when Kyouko and I went to meet Kai-kun's mom, Tsukiko-san, and she smiled and said, 'It's all right'...” Hokuto’s voice grew increasingly passionate.

“Your mom, who had never cried in front of anyone… she let her tears fall freely, looking so relieved, and kept saying ‘Thank you’ over and over again as she cried. Of course, I was so happy I almost started crying too.”

Seina listened to Hokuto’s words in silence. Seina thought he understood the hardships his family had faced, but this was the first time he had truly felt them as a reality.

“After that, I felt a lot lighter emotionally. But even so, my heart gradually wore itself out. Trying to send you to a school outside the area was a manifestation of that.”

“You wanted to lighten the burden, even just a little…?”

He thought it was only natural for him to think that. In fact, he thought it was the obvious conclusion.

“I was prepared to take care of you for the rest of my life. I just wanted other people to know. To know how hard it was to look after you… and just how amazing and kind the people of Masaki Village are. That’s why I wish you had come home earlier.”

“But I…”

“Yeah. That’s why Mom and I were scared… We were on pins and needles, wondering when you’d come back.”

“I guess so. The business was finally starting to go well. And yet, if I came back, it would be back to…”

They’d be back to that tiny general store. No, that would actually be better. If they expanded the store only to fail and end up saddled with massive debt, that would be the end. Now that Seina had gained so much, he could understand just how terrifying that would be.

“The shop doesn’t matter at all. But, but… what I feared most was that, at that moment, I might come to resent you, my own son.”

“Dad!?” Seina looked up at his father in surprise. He was grateful that he had been worried about him, rather than just the shop.

“...Thank you. That makes me happy.”

“But you know what? It really is true that it’s easier done than said. You’ve really grown into a fine young man. When you first came back, the reason Mom and I were so surprised wasn’t just because we saw Amane-san and the others. It was because you’d grown up so much, you were almost unrecognizable. Well, you’ve always had a certain air of world-weariness about you, but this time, you were overflowing with confidence.”

“I-I guess so? I’m not really sure myself…”

It felt a little embarrassing to be praised so directly by his father. But he was genuinely happy that he’d become a son his father could be proud of.

“Listen, Seina… Your mom and I were talking, and we started wondering if maybe we’ve been stifling your potential all this time. We wondered if we’d been holding you back based on our own selfish assumptions.”

“That’s not true. There just wasn’t any place out there that would have worked. It worked out because it was that specific place.”

“Hearing you say that puts my mind at ease a little. But man… you brought back so many stunningly beautiful woman, it’s hard to believe. Who’s the one you really love?” Perhaps because his worries had been resolved, Hokuto’s demeanor suddenly became much more relaxed.

“W-Who’s the one I really love!? What are you talking about? Those people are just helping me out… It's rude to even think of them that way.”

“Is that so? I don’t think anyone would get mad over something like that.”

“Well… I guess so.” Seina looked down, looking embarrassed.

Seeing that still childlike reaction, Hokuto felt a little relieved.

(Yeah. Maybe it’s too soon to expect that from him… After all, romance is the only thing where he acts his age.)

He found his son endearing, for Hokuto, it was one of the few ways he could truly recognize him as his own son.

“Well, it’s fine. After all, you’ve gained a new possibility for the future.”

“……Possibility, huh……” Seina said as if savoring the words. They were words of hope.

“Then there’s no need to rush. You still have plenty of time.”

“……Yeah. You’re right.” With that, Seina looked up at the moon in the night sky once more.

The moon he used to gaze at with a sigh. The moon that was absolutely out of reach, a symbol of despair.

——But now, that place is filled with possibility. There is hope there.

And tomorrow, he would return to that world.

[Tenchi Muyo! GXP Volume 9: The End]

Afterword

Note: We recommend reading this Afterword Theater after the main text.

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Afterword Theater: Part 6

Seina’s friend A was chatting with friend C at friend B’s house, looking satisfied as he looked at photos of Amane and the others taken on his cell phone.

“Seriously! I’m amazed at how clueless you are. If it were me, I’d have taken way more photos of those ladies. Like, tons and tons of them…!”

Friend B grumbled as he stared intently at the photos he’d received from Friend A. Beside him, Friend C was also engrossed in the photos of Amane and the others.

“Kiriko-san told me to take just one, so what could I do?”

“You've got to be clever about it, whether it's a secret recording or whatever...”

“I don't want to do something like that and have them hate me~” Friend A said as he blushed and kissed his phone screen.

“Just think about it. Have you ever heard of anyone else who actually managed to pull off a secret photo shoot? Are there any other photos out there besides this one?”

“Hmph! You're the only one who's been up close with those ladies...”

“But Seina was with me, so I was in a safe zone. Since that’s the case, they’re working at Super Yamada, so why don’t you go check them out yourself?”

“The snacks you're eating right now were bought at that very Yamada!”

In front of his friends lay a mountain of snacks.

“Thanks to that, my allowance for this month is already... Ugh!”

It seemed he’d spent his entire allowance just to look at Amane and the others.

“But it was totally worth it... They're so beautiful, it's like they're not even human. The girls in our class? No way! Hell, even TV idols would end up in the same category as the girls in our class compared to those girls!”

“For the first time in my life, I actually envy Seina!”

“Whoa! Me too!”

Friend B and Friend C exchanged a firm, heartfelt hug.

“Now that it’s come to this, is there any way we can meet those ladies directly through Seina?”

“No way, no way. He’s practically living in Masaki Village right now.”

“...Well, if he hangs around here, it’d ruin the shop they’ve worked so hard to build.”

Despite all their talk, the friends knew Seina’s nature all too well.

“And besides!” Friend A slammed a bag of snacks he’d been hiding behind his back down on the table.

“...What? You too? Well, there isn’t a single guy at school who hasn’t seen this.”

“I ran into Kai on my way back after buying this a little while ago...”

“Whoa! Kai was there! I managed to get in touch through Kiriko-san…”

“Yeah, that guy… Kiriko-san was beating him up like a punching bag. So, when I asked him about it, he said Seina wouldn’t budge an inch, he said he couldn’t introduce us because of his position, so he apparently asked Kiriko-san instead…”

“So he asked for an introduction and got turned down... Well, looks like both Seina and the Kai route are hopeless then.”

“...No, apparently what he asked was for her to wear a swimsuit from his collection and let him take a picture of her.”

“W-wait, by ‘his collection,’ you don’t mean… that, do you!?”

Both Friend B and Friend C grimaced. It was the swimsuit, barely more than a string, that Dai had brought over hoping Tsukiko would wear it, only to be nearly beaten to a pulp by her, and which Kai had hidden away after it was discarded.

“He made up some excuse about using the photos for a Super Yamada ad or something, but in the end, Kiriko-san kicked him in the neck, knocking him out, and he was delivered to his home by the delivery person.”

“He’s such an idiot.”

“I kind of suspected it, but he really is an idiot.”

“Yeah, he’s an idiot… but…”

(I really wanted to see her in that swimsuit...)

His friends munched on snacks, grinning creepily as their imaginations ran wild.

“Anyway, we figured out the cause! We just need to convince that idiot Kai to introduce us normally! I’ll contact him right now…”

“Judging by how badly he was hurt, he probably won’t wake up today.”

His friends knew Kai’s habits inside out. Besides, the clock on the desk was already nearing 5:00 p.m.

“Alright, then, we’ll do it tomorrow morning! Don’t be late, okay?”

“Yeah! We'll do it!”

“Heh heh heh! I’m feeling hopeful now. I’ll make sure to recoup the allowance I spent this month!”

At Friend B’s words, the other two friends nodded with beaming smiles. At Super Yamada, all they ever got was a polite smile as customers. But tomorrow, they might finally be recognized as Seina’s friends, and friends of Kai. And maybe, on a personal level…

“Heh heh heh… Aaaaaahahaha!”

The friends let their imaginations run wild, laughing like mad as they howled at the ceiling. But it was the very next day that Kiriko and the others were summoned back to space on short notice.

The End

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Well, this time, a major (though small in terms of file size) incident occurred, and I was struck by the misfortune of having the text data for this work saved in a corrupted state. As for the backup… well, as a result, three-quarters of the nearly finished work was lost, and I had to rewrite it.

That day, I couldn't bring myself to do anything else, and I vaguely thought, "I guess publication will be around the middle of next year…" But things always work out somehow. Of course, since I'd already written the story once, I didn't think it would take the same amount of time, but I never imagined I could recreate over five months' worth of work in just about a month…

And there was a silver lining to this misfortune. I was able to include many episodes I hadn't thought of during the initial stages, and though I may be biased, I actually think it turned out better than before it was lost. Well, since so much was lost, there's a lot I've forgotten, so there might be parts where the original version was actually better.

Not all the villagers from Masaki Village appeared in this version either, so if I get the chance, I'll fill in the gaps somewhere through Tennyo.

Well, the next volume takes us back to space, and with a clash against a mysterious fleet and a vacation at a resort. Or rather, a rather extended vacation, it looks like things are going to get pretty eventful... Anyway, it's packed with all sorts of episodes. Plus, there are even more people around Seina than there were in the anime... Hmm, I wonder just how far this will go...

Masaki Kajishima